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"A stone, a leaf, an unfound door":

Thomas Wolfe's Platonic search

by

John Michael Burger

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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INTRODUCTION

In Phaedrus, Plato describes his theory of the prenatal existence of the soul. He says that the soul is immortal and is moved by itself. He describes the "region above the heavens": it is "occupied by being which really is, which is without color or shape, intangible, observable by the steersman of the soul alone, by intellect." Here the soul "is glad at last to see what is and is nourished and made happy by gazing on what is true" (Plato 63). The soul looks upon the Forms or Ideas of justice, self-control, knowledge, love, etc. Here, it is as if souls are in a school. The better they learn about the Ideas of justice, knowledge, etc., the better they will do in their life on earth and the faster they will return to this blissful region.

After this education in heaven, souls are planted in seeds, which are to become human beings. Depending upon how much the soul saw in the "heaven," it will be planted in the seed of a philosopher, a craftsman, a tyrant, or one of six other types of persons. This earthly life is much different from the life before birth, when we celebrated the "most blessed of mysteries, . . . whole, simple, unchanging and blissful revelations, in a pure light." We were "pure ourselves and not entombed" in the body (69).

Certain people, therefore, can have more vision of the earlier life than others. Some souls may have seen the Ideas in heaven only briefly; others may have fallen to earth among

"certain kinds of company," forgotten the holy things they saw in the upper region, and become unjust. "Few souls are left who have sufficient memory; and these, when they see some likeness of the things there, are driven out of their wits with amazement and lose control of themselves, though they do not know what has happened to them for lack of clear perception" (69).

Thus, when a person on earth sees beauty, he or she is "reminded of true beauty, becomes winged; fluttering with eagerness to fly upwards, but unable to leave the ground, looking upwards like a bird, and taking no heed of the things below, causes him to be regarded as mad" (67). The artist or the philosopher or the mystic is such a person. He or she may glimpse what is real--the Ideas of nature--and try to return to the place where his or her soul knew and moved among those Ideas.

Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel is the story of such a search. Subtitled "A Story of the Buried Life," it takes its clue mainly from Plato, but also from the British Romantic poets, particularly William Wordsworth. This thesis will show Wolfe's place in the Platonic-Romantic tradition, and look at the way Wolfe not only uses, but makes new, the Platonic myth of prenatal existence. I will look at his symbolism of "A stone, a leaf, a door" in connection with Plato's theory. And, in light of a letter he wrote in 1923, in which he said, "Someday, I'm going to write a play . . . for my soul's ease and comfort" (Wolfe Letters 41), I will try to determine if he was working toward a new

mythology that would explain the fact of death for his own peace of mind.

The following abbreviations will be used in this thesis for the works of Thomas Wolfe:

Letters. The Letters of Thomas Wolfe

LHA. Look Homeward, Angel

OTR. Of Time and the River

SN. The Story of a Novel

WR. The Web and the Rock

YCGHA. You Can't Go Home Again

LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL IN THE PLATONIC-ROMANTIC TRADITION

Survey of Criticism

Richard Kennedy, in The Window of Memory, says that Wolfe, "in dealing with individual man's place in the universe of Necessity and Chance," makes use of Plato's myth of pre-existence (129). Wolfe "attempts to link a Platonic view of man with his vitalist interpretation of life." That vitalist interpretation says that "evolution is purposive and man participates in its forward march" (9, 10). However, Wolfe's view of humanity, that though our days are brief, we leave "enduring intellectual and artistic monuments, . . . required something more comprehensive than vitalist doctrine" (9, 10). Look Homeward Angel deals with the problem of reality, using Plato's idea of the prenatal life (93). Wolfe had picked up Plato's view when translating Phaedo, Meno, Timaeus, and other works in college, as well as from one of his Harvard professors, John Livingston Lowes.

Kennedy (129) also cites Wolfe's debt to Wordsworth, particularly to his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", in which the adult narrator laments the passing of a time when he was closer to prenatal existence than he is now. This time was early childhood, when every common sight seemed "apparelled in celestial light" (line 4). He compares the feeling he had then to "the freshness of a dream" (5): his birth, or his soul's recent fall from the upper world, is analogous to a waking from a beautiful dream; now, the

longer he is alive, the more he forgets of that dream. "The things which I have seen I now can see no more" (9). He addresses a child as "best Philosopher, Mighty Prophet, Seer blest" (111, 115), for the child has the best vision of the previous life.

But the adult need not lose hope of remembering the prenatal life. Comparing life to a storm, the narrator says that in calm weather (that is, moments of transcendence), we can catch a glimpse of the sea from which we came. We may be far inland (that is, in the middle of life), but we will soon enough go to the shore (in death) and watch the children play and listen to the "mighty waters rolling evermore" (168).

But Wolfe's hero in Look Homeward, Angel, Eugene Gant, wants to return sooner than death. He is affected by visions of the "regions above the heavens" (to use Plato's phrase) and feels he can find his roots there--and possibly a meaning to existence.

Monro M. Stearns says that Wolfe, unable to fit his personality into the world, found sublimation of his world view in Coleridge and Wordsworth. Stearns describes three stages an artist must go through in order to become adjusted to the world: the "idea of God as a void, . . . the idea of God as enemy," and the idea of God as friend (196). Wolfe never became fully adjusted to the world because he never got past the second stage; for most of his life and career, in fact, he was trapped in the first stage. Thus, Wolfe thought of himself as an orphan.

His relationship with his mother did not help this self-view. Stearns describes the importance of early mother-child relationships, saying that the "nursing period equals the sustenance and seclusion of the womb," from which the child has just been forcibly expelled. So that the "shock of having to sustain himself" will be lessened, weaning should occur before the onset and "painfulness of consciousness," when "the child struggles to gain his emotional equilibrium" (197). But Julia Wolfe refused to wean her son until he was three and a half. Thus Wolfe experienced a "frantic sense of rejection and abandonment" from his mother (197). He then turned to his father for a relationship. Indeed, in Look Homeward, Angel, Eugene's father, W.O. Gant, is depicted as writing to Eugene's sister, Helen: "Eugene is staying with the Leonards while your mother's away. . . . Poor child. He has no mother anymore. I'll do the best I can for him until the smash comes" (LHA 262).

But in real life William Oliver Wolfe was a socially irresponsible and semi-outcast man, Stearns says, and Thomas' identification with him (they were both great imbibers and womanizers, both verbose, both disdainful of what they saw as pettiness) made the son more of an outcast than he previously felt himself to be. Moreover, Wolfe grew up in squalid surroundings. He found "the secret of releasing his feelings of rejection and revulsion . . . in the metaphysical Wordsworth and Coleridge" (Stearns 199), especially the latter: "The Rime of the Ancient

"Mariner" is about the journey of an outcast soul. Stearns discusses Wordsworth's and Coleridge's use of the Platonic doctrine of prenatal existence, and says that soon after Wordsworth wrote "The Rainbow" and the "Intimations Ode" he "passed into the third stage of artistic development [seeing God as a friend] and became reconciled with his world" (202). Coleridge, like Wolfe, never did pass into that third stage, however, and did not become reconciled with his world.

Wolfe's early familiarity with Wordsworth, however, provided an escape from his isolation and the squalor around him. "Wolfe recognized the similarity of [Wordsworth's] emotions to his own" (202). He transformed Wordsworth's phrase from Book III of The Prelude, "a tree, a stone, a withered leaf" into his "stone, leaf, door" motto, which he used to express "the psychological pains of birth" (202).

The loss of relationship with his protector-mother is symbolized for Wolfe in Wordsworth's nostalgia for that spiritual home whence comes the soul trailing its clouds of glory. (202)

Combining these ideas with Coleridge's view of a human being's necessity to do penance (such as the ancient mariner's), life for Wolfe becomes "a penance for the sin of having been born and having left the apocalyptic world of Plato, Plotinus, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, in which the soul knows its true nature

and is free" (202). Wolfe sees the other world not so much as a distinct entity; it is interwoven with his own existence.

Stearns also discusses terms that Wolfe uses in recurring refrains:

"Home" is not only the Asheville boarding house of Wolfe's childhood or a prenatal uterine existence; the word is also used in the Wordsworthian sense for God. The search for a father becomes, as well, a search for God. The "door" is the entrance both back to the protective maternal womb and to the heaven from which, in the Platonic doctrine, we in our essence come. The "stone, leaf, door" refrain symbolizes not only the pain of birth but also the tokens (like Wordsworth's rainbow, rose, tree, and pansy) which remind the mortal of his immortal nature. The "lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost" corresponds to the sense of the pre-existence of the soul, which vanishes as the individual advances in material time down the river of corporeal existence. (203-204)

Louis D. Rubin says that Wolfe did not work out the myth of pre-existence too elaborately in his works, though it is a continuing theme in his fiction. Wolfe saw life as imprisonment in time. Not only does this imprisonment take place at birth, the human becomes more and more imprisoned as time goes on: "his chronological life represents a gradual but steady progression in

the snares of time" (68). Life becomes more complex, and the adult finds it difficult to recapture moments of "transcendence over mortal time and physical space" (74).

Rubin discusses Wolfe's use of Plato in a later novel, The Web and the Rock. There, George Webber, recovering in a Munich hospital from wounds sustained in an Oktoberfest brawl, looks at himself in a mirror and sees himself as a dichotomy. There is himself--his spirit, his essence--which is eternal and beyond time, and his body--his flesh and bone, which exists in time and is "accidental," that is, it happens to be. Webber looks at his body, "unspeaking, saying 'I', but outside of it, and opposite, regardant, thinking, 'Well, by God, you are a pretty sight!' --and meaning, not Himself, but It" (WR 689).

This scene proceeds to a dialogue between "Body" and "Man." Man, the spirit, blames Body for imprisoning it. Body claims that Man would be nothing without it, that Body is beautiful. Body denies having any soul but that which is "suspended down below the waist" (WR 691). Then Body concedes that Body is an accident and "a millstone round [Man's] neck." The two discuss the "Worm" of anxiety (cf. WR 693), which enters life as a result of an "insatiable quest for complete quantitative experience" (Rubin, 1955, 58).

What Body and Man both agree upon is that the best time was childhood when the anxious worm was barely, if at all, in evidence, and the union of the physical

Body in experience and the essential Man of spirit was most nearly perfect. (Rubin, 1955, 59)

It is Man that has an increasing desire for sensory experience; it is Man that interprets all experience and places meaning on it. Body is merely the medium for experience and sensation, and therefore not responsible for "the turning of the Worm."

Rubin sees Wolfe as being close to Wordsworth in a number of ways. His essence and accident theories resemble Wordsworth's "child as father of the man." His distinction of chronological time--the life of man on earth--on the one hand, and "time immutable"--the time of pre- and post-existence--on the other, resembles Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode," in which we see the child, who reads "the eternal deep, / Haunted forever by the eternal Mind" (113-114).

John Hagan notes that what gives Look Homeward, Angel its drama is the clash within the narrator of "early nineteenth-century romanticism and late nineteenth-century pessimistic determinism." The "door" is not only a means to enter pre-existence, it is a symbol of escape in general. Eugene lives in a "bleak, deterministic prison-house of 'destiny,' 'chance,' 'necessity,' and 'accident'." His mystical experiences feed his yearning for transcendence, "for escape into beauty and order, permanence and perfection--his desire, in a word, for Earthly Paradise" (125).

W. P. Albrecht believes that the refuge Eugene seeks, though prenatal, is not a heavenly home, as in the "Intimations Ode." Rather, the prenatal life "appears to be the endless concatenation of cause and effect preceding and shaping the circumstances of Eugene's birth and life, extending beyond the barren South of the Pentlands to the abundance of Gant's Pennsylvania and still farther back beyond the seas. Thus, Eugene's preexistence is linked with the better time of the Gants," whose abundance, cleanliness, and order is in sharp contrast to the Pentlands' crass materialism and disorder (51).

The Novel's Imagery

Much of the dominant imagery in Look Homeward, Angel, particularly of light, laughter, sound, and the sea, is related to Plato's myth of prenatal existence. Much, also, is borrowed from Wordsworth.

Light in the novel has the same ambiguous connotations that Cleanth Brooks sees in the "Intimations Ode." Light is a quality of the previous state: it represents wisdom. But light also clouds the vision of that previous state. The difference is that daylight is physical light--"prosaic daylight," as Brooks calls it (130), and the light of Eugene's visions and lost world is what Wordsworth calls a "radiance" or a "glory" or "celestial light." Thus Eugene's visions must take place in darkness, the "prenatal" darkness of morning. For example, he has a paper-route that he

must begin before dawn. This is a time when "fiend-voices" come to him and urge him to return to his prenatal life. Other instances of visions in darkness take place on a train ride to Charleston and in the square of Altamont, following his brother Ben's death. We will look more closely at all three of these experiences later in this thesis.

Chapter 14 of Look Homeward, Angel, describing the waking of Altamont, begins in darkness, but emphasizes the progress that daylight makes through that darkness. The world before dawn is inhabited by people who have greater allegorical significance than most of those who rise in the "light of common day" (Wordsworth "Ode" 75): doctors, an undertaker, a pressman, a train engineer, and Ben. The progress of the dawn is reported at intervals and in magical terms throughout the chapter. The "lilac darkness" is at first "pricked with cool and tender stars," but eventually the sky becomes "faintly pearled at the horizon." Later, it is "pearl-gray" and the stars look "drowned." Later still,

Nacreous pearl light swam faintly about the hem of the
lilac darkness; the edges of light and darkness were
stitched upon the hills. Morning moved like a
pearl-gray tide across the fields and up the
hill-flanks, flowing rapidly down into the soluble
dark. (144)

and

The light that filled the world now was soft and
 otherworldly like the light that fills the sea-floors
 of Catalina where the great fish swim. (145)

Also, light, as well as birds and sound (laughter, music, and bells) defy gravity. These objects share the quality of weightlessness with the world of spirit, the world that Eugene must return to. Therefore, they are symbols of prenatal existence in Look Homeward, Angel.

At the beginning of Chapter 17, for example, schoolmaster John Dorsey Leonard tries to conduct a Latin class, but is interrupted by questions from the curious pupils, including questions about Catullus and Lesbia. Leonard is embarrassed and tries to skirt the subject but finally must resort to taking the hard line of a disciplinarian. He orders Tom Davis, whom he sees grinning, to begin translating at a certain point in the book, but before Tom Davis has a chance to do so, the bell rings. "And Tom Davis's laughter filled the room" (183). The bell allows the pupils to leave a "heavy" lecture, and Tom Davis's laughter symbolizes the feeling of lightness which all the pupils now must have. Furthermore, because the school has just been founded and may lack any kind of support staff, it is likely that the bell was rung by Margaret Leonard, the schoolmaster's wife and Eugene's spiritual mentor. She symbolizes for Eugene a way to transcend the pettiness of things like John Dorsey's grammar and find a passage to pre-existence.

Laughter, also, is a purgative for the Gant children, who are living with their mother's parsimony and their father's slow death. Once, W.O. tries to have sex with Annie, a boarder's Negro cook. Annie makes a great scene, Helen berates her father, and the children

laughed wildly, helplessly, draining into mad laughter all the welled and agglutinated hysteria that had gathered in them, washing out in a moment of fierce surrender all the fear and fatality of their lives, the pain of age and death. (240)

Furthermore, women who are sensual are often full of laughter. If, as I will ask in this thesis, sexuality is a possible passage to the prenatal life, the women who provide that way would have the quality of lightness that the prenatal life has. Laughter gives them that quality. Eugene listens to the "rich sensual burst" of Mrs. Selbourne's laughter (122), for example.

Also, people who are either crazy or on the edge of lunacy are both attributed laughing qualities and seem to represent something of the higher world. Simon, the crazy millionaire who stays at Dixieland, and who tells Eugene cryptically to "always be good to the birds," bursts out in his room with "satanic laughter" (166).

Luke Gant, who does better as a salesman than as an electrical engineering student, is described both as a "wild angel" and a demonic, idiot laughder.

His features were . . . illuminated by the strange inner smile of idiot ecstasy. His broad mouth . . . was always cocked for laughter--idiot laughter. . . . He would burst into a wild "whah-whah-whah-whah" of laughter, beyond all reason. (LHA 210)

It is interesting to note the similarity of Luke's "smile of idiot ecstasy" and W.O.'s stone angel that "wore a smile of soft stone idiocy" (221). The angel represents the soul. Luke, therefore, is more filled with his soul than those around him. He is more of a child: "When he reflected, he was a child" (210). We might read here that his face resembled that of a child. His face, further,

was a church in which beauty and humor were married-- the strange and the familiar were at one in him. Men, looking at Luke, felt a start of recognition as if they saw something of which they had never heard, but which they had known forever. (211)

That something is the life they all left when they were born. As adults they have forgotten "the glory and the dream" of childhood, but recognize the laughter of children--their own lost laughter-- in Luke.

When Eugene, at age thirteen, gets a paper-route, he overcomes a personal sense of failure by getting most of the

"dead-heads" on the route to pay their long-standing bills. His sense of accomplishment and freedom, coupled with the expectancy of a lightening load of papers--"the aerial ecstasy of release" (248)--causes him to laugh:

As the wind yelled through the dark, he burst into maniacal laughter. He leaped into the air with a scream of insane exultancy, burred in his throat idiot animal-squeals, and shot his papers terrifically into the flimsy boarding of the shacks. He was free. He was alone. (250)

Rubin, analyzing the chapter entitled "The Parting" in The Web and the Rock (600-615), sees George Webber's squeals as being close to Wordsworth's "intimations of immortality."

The squeal was obviously George Webber's reaction to a sudden access of a sense of freedom from human confinement, moments when he became conscious of immutable time and infinite space, and felt free of chronological time and place. (Rubin, 1955, 71)

The "idiot animal-squeals" in the paper-route scene seem to be similarly occasioned, especially since their occurrence is coupled with a sense of fraternity which Rubin also finds in The Web and the Rock. Webber's "spirit had swept out across the fields of sleep and he had heard the heartbeats of ten million men around him" (WR 609). In a similar way, Eugene "heard the howl of a train-whistle, and it was not so far away. In the

darkness he flung his arm out to the man on the rails, his goggled brother. . . " (LHA 250). Further, we may see here one source (or at least an early manifestation) of Eugene's love of trains and desire to travel; I will discuss travel as a possible passage later in this thesis.

Imagery of the sea seems to be taken from Wordsworth's "Ode," where he writes,

Hence in a season of calm weather
 Though inland far we be,
 Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
 Which brought us hither,
 Can in a moment travel thither,
 And see the Children sport upon the shore,
 And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore. (160-166)

Thus, the sea in Look Homeward, Angel represents either the prenatal life or the womb which brought us from that prenatal life. The shore represents birth.

Sea imagery is often combined with bells in Look Homeward, Angel. When Eugene hears a bell in his mind, as if it is ringing undersea, the bell is a symbol of Eugene's remembrance of his prenatal existence (Kennedy 130).

Arriving at a Title for the Novel

Several titles that Wolfe came up with before he settled on "Look Homeward, Angel" suggest that he intended the book to be

about a search for the former life. "O Lost" was the title that Wolfe clung to for the longest time, but other possibilities were "Prison of Earth," "Alone Alone," and "The Lost Language" (Kennedy 177). All point to the fact that Wolfe had prenatal existence in mind for the theme of the work.

"Prison of Earth" reminds us of Plato's view that the soul falls to earth into the body, the prison house of the soul. In fact, in the proem to Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe calls the mother's womb the "prison of her flesh" and this life the "unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth" (1).

"Alone Alone," another alternative title that Wolfe had in mind, implies that the soul, prisoned in the body, is alone because it cannot commune with other souls or the Ideas it moved among in the earlier life: "Naked and alone we came into exile," Wolfe writes in the proem. "Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?" (1).

"The Lost Language" reminds us that the soul, prisoned in the body, has lost the ability to contemplate Ideas. Again, the proem: "Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?" (1). This remembering of the "great forgotten language" is the motive for the search. It is a

momentary glimpse into the transcendent life, which holds out hope for the prison-pent.

The "Stone, Leaf, Door" Motif

The title Wolfe finally settled on--"Look Homeward, Angel"--implies that the soul is symbolized by an Angel. It is asked to look toward its true home--not the body, but the world of Ideas. Eugene's whole quest is to do just this. He always has his sight on this home, and tries desperately to find a door that leads to the "lost lane-end into heaven." But he ever encounters a wall, though it is a nebulous one, not clearly defined--a "wall of light." He gropes for anything that will lead to a passage through it: a stone that can be rolled away from an opening; a leaf that can be picked up off a garden floor, revealing a passageway, as it might in a "secret garden;" a door, which is forever "unfound."

He groped for the doorless land of faery, that
illimitable haunted country that opened somewhere
below a leaf or a stone. (229)

These are Wolfe's main symbols and partly the objects of Eugene's search. Kennedy sees the "unfound door" as representing not only an entrance into the prenatal life, but also an "escape into illusion" and "the way to life's ultimate secrets; in short, it is the door to a world of spirit" (132-133). But E. K. Brown has a much different view of the three symbols, which he calls "three

central symbols for the nature of life. . . . The stone is the angel which dominates not only the title but the text of the first novel." Stone is also the medium W.O. chooses to work in and "grapple with the meaning of the universe"; it is too resistant and W.O. is never able to carve an angel's head. The leaf represents October's "annual recurrence of death." The image came from Coleridge, whom Brown quotes:

The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
That dances as often as dance it can,
Hanging so light and hanging so high,
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.

Finally, the door symbolizes "the thin barrier between personalities." Such is the door that leads George Webber to Esther Jack in The Web and the Rock. Esther's personality contains experiences that George's does not. George is confined, as all individuals are, to "a fragment of space and a moment of time" (Brown 220). Through Esther he can experience the 1890's and dinners with Morgans and Barrymores. Thus Esther is a door through which George can satisfy his need for momentary escape.

Whether Wolfe believes any of us can ever find the lost paradise beyond these objects is one of the questions of this thesis. To answer that question, we have to ask where Eugene looks to find those objects. Three places that seem to hold the answer for him, at least for a time, are sex, language, and travel. For example, sex might be a passage through the womb,

leading the searcher back to life before birth. A passage through language, on the other hand, would involve a search for a "lost language" or a key word that would reveal the mystery of existence. And travel might be actual travel on trains, for example, during which the traveler experiences transcendence. Or it may be an imaginary voyage across the sea, with an implication that the sea is the womb or the boundary of birth, beyond which the searcher will find the lost world. In this thesis I will examine all three of these areas, and others as they come up.

The View of Childhood

Let us first examine some of the key points of Eugene's life in light of Plato's mythology. Childhood is an important time for Wolfe, as it is for Wordsworth. Look Homeward, Angel is a novel about a child and about his growth away from the time when his memory of prenatal existence was sharpest. With the onset of adulthood, Eugene's prenatal existence becomes "the buried life." The playhouse that sits behind W.O. Gant's house symbolizes this progression. W.O. built the playhouse for his children when they were young. By the time Eugene, the youngest child, reaches adolescence, the playhouse is shut up. The air in it becomes imprisoned (238). Look Homeward, Angel is about his quest to enter that playhouse, to find the buried life, again.

Since childhood is so important to Wolfe, he places Eugene's childhood at the center of the novel. The first three chapters

lead up to his birth. The birth itself is written of with the splendor usually reserved for kings or divinities, and as if it had been awaited by history. As an infant, Eugene is portrayed as being eminently aware of the world, of his past, and of his present condition. And the end of Eugene's adolescence does not come until close to the end of the novel.

His birth is placed in an important historical context: he was born in "the very spear-head of history" (LHA 29). Wolfe temporally relates the event to everything in history, beginning with the lives and works of Oscar Wilde and James A. McNeill Whistler, the "Great Victorians," William McKinley, and Lord Roberts ("Little Bobs"); and to the events of the day, including the Spanish-American War ("the Spanish navy had returned home in a tugboat"), Britain's dealings in South Africa and its annexation of the Transvaal Republic ("in the month of Eugene's birth"), the first parliament meeting in Japan, Japan's war with China, and China's ceding of Formosa to Japan. These are events of Eugene's day, but he also comes at the end of a long line of history, from the evolution of "our earliest ancestors out of the primeval slime" through the ancient civilizations of the Egyptians and Greeks, the medieval civilization of Europe ("Pope Sixtus the Fifth"), the American Civil War, to the events of the last ten years. "Such was the state of history when Eugene entered the theatre of human events in 1900" (30).

Relating all these events to the birth gives us a picture of the world and of history as seen by the soul of Eugene, descending from heaven. While in heaven, the soul has an eternal and infinite view of life. While descending into the body, it sees everything that is going on in the world at the time. Then, when the soul is trapped in the body, the view narrows and the memory is lost. Soon after the passage relating the birth of Eugene to history, the narrator apologizes that he cannot give a "more extended account of the world [that Eugene's] life touched during the first few years, . . . the meaning of life as seen from the . . . crib" because the child's impressions are suppressed in later life: "recurring waves of loneliness, weariness, depression, aberration, and utter blankness . . . war against the order in a man's mind until he is three or four years old" (30).

Rubin sees this history passage as a manifestation of Wolfe's ideas about "time immutable" versus the chronological time of a man's life:

When Wolfe has Eugene Gant enter "the theater of human events in 1900," he must first resume human history from the arrival upon land of the first amphibians up to the annexation of the Transvaal Republic by Great Britain in the month of Eugene's birth, so that Eugene falls heir to all of historical experience when he enters mortal time. (64)

In spite of the fact that the baby will forget his life in heaven, he lies in his crib, thinking of many things. He is wiser than the adults around him, but he now has a body to deal with ("the undisciplined and rowdy bladder"). He is frustrated, because he does not have the language that the adults are using: "he had no words to work with." He is sad because, in spite of the greatness of his advent, the place to which he has come is a prison. The imagery is appropriate: "left alone to sleep within a shuttered room, with the thick sunlight printed in bars upon the floor." There seems to be little hope of finding the door leading back. The child

saw his life down the solemn vista of a forest aisle,
and he knew he would always be the sad one: caged in
that little round of skull, imprisoned in that beating
and most secret heart, his life must always walk down
lonely passages. Lost. He understood that men were
forever strangers to one another, that no one ever
comes really to know any one, that imprisoned in the
dark womb of our mother, we come to life without
having seen her face, that we are given to her arms a
stranger, and that, caught in that insoluble prison of
being, we escape it never, no matter what arms may
clasp us, what mouth may kiss us, what heart may warm
us. Never, never, never, never, never. (31)

He sees too that the adults that stick their faces into his crib, although they have language, are not helped by it in their communication with each other. In fact, their language seems to widen the gaps between them.

Eugene then is a thinking, rational, wise being, even before he can speak. But he is confused and unhappy. "He had been sent from one mystery into another," from eternal life into finite life. He hears a faintly ringing bell, "as if it sounded undersea," and "as he listened, the ghost of memory walked through his mind, and for a moment he felt that he had almost recovered what he had lost" (31).

This is one of his first memories of the life he just left. Soon after it takes place, he hears "the loud, faery thunder of Daisy's parlor music." This music, which he hears again later in life, serves as a way to bring his mind back to the memory of the earlier life ("a door opened in his brain"). In this way, music serves as an "intimation of immortality."

At the same time, he is trying to make order out of the sensations that bombard him. He is given blocks with the letters of the alphabet on them ("the stones of the temple of language"), which is one way of ordering experience. With these blocks, he strives "desperately to find the key that would draw order and intelligence from this anarchy." Later, he will try to find the key that leads him back to the better kind of wisdom. For now,

the "bell [rings] under the sea," reminding him of what he is leaving behind (32).

In his childhood he is drawn in many different directions, but he wants to hold on to the "glory and the dream" of his earlier life. Fantasies, especially those prompted by books or movies, play an inchoate part in his attempt to hold on to his earlier life. His reading of romance novels at an early age allows him to enter another world, where his ego can find some sort of happiness through domination over evil and attainment of love. He is searching for any kind of happiness akin to that felt in his earlier life. When he finds other potential passages later, he can compare them with this early one and come to a better understanding of the object of his search.

When he begins to apply his sexual fantasies to actual persons, he sees sex as another possible door. I will deal with this possibility more thoroughly in the next chapter.

W.O. starts taking Eugene to the "moving pictures" when the boy is about twelve. Eugene fantasizes during a western that he fills the role of "the good guy," who shoots the outlaw and wins the love of the victimized dancing girl. What is significant is that Eugene calls himself "The Dixie Ghost." The ghost that appears in apostrophe throughout the novel symbolizes the lost life of the soul: "O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again." The Dixie Ghost "had faced death many times" (226). So had the ghost of Eugene--dying first when the soul became

trapped in the body, dying again and again as that body gets caught up in the cares of this world. With each new care, more memory is lost of the earlier life. . As Eugene and W.O. exit the theater, Eugene realizes that not only were his fantasies unreal, his present life is unreal: it is "the shadow of a shadow, a play within a play. He was the Ghost and he who played the Ghost" (227). He is his soul, as well as the body which covers up his soul.

Later, when he is leaving his childhood and entering adolescence, he has glimpses of his prenatal existence that serve to call him back. As with Daisy's piano music, memory of key events help tick off something in his brain and doors are opened up.

Old haunt-eyed faces glimmered in his memory. He thought of Swain's cow, St. Louis, death, himself in the cradle. He was the hunter of himself, trying for a moment to recover what he had been part of. He did not understand change, he did not understand growth. He stared at his framed baby picture in the parlor, and turned away sick with fear and the effort to touch, retain, grasp himself for only a moment. (158)

When he goes to college at Pulpit Hill, his self-image as a child is mixed: he is only sixteen, and thus still a child in ways, yet in ways he is not. In spite of having seen a lot of pain and evil, he is still an idealist, still "walled up in his

great city of visions. . . . The harsh rasp of the world had worn no grooving in the secret life" (325).

There is something here of the romantic view that childhood and its vision and beauty are lost among all the adult cares, the "important things" of the world. "Again and again," Eugene is "bogged down in the gray slough of factuality" (325). But he is holding on still to "the glory and the dream":

He was not a child when he reflected, but when he dreamt, he was; and it was the child and dreamer that governed his belief. He belonged, perhaps, to an older and simpler race of men: he belonged with the Mythmakers. (325)

In fact, he is an artist, and as an artist, he is naturally more sensitive to life and to himself than those around him are (the money- and property-hungry). Since he is sensitive to his own development as a human being, he sees the difference between himself as a child and himself as an adult. The child is happier; therefore, Eugene will try to recapture his childhood. Let us now look at ways he tries to do this.

THE WOMB AS DOOR

Earlier, we saw how Wolfe prepared us for the great event of Eugene's birth by cataloging a list of historical events. The list is chronologically backwards, ending with a humorous reference to human evolution. But this reference is also an analogy to Plato's myth:

Finally, only thirty or forty million years before,
our earliest ancestors had crawled out of the primeval
slime; and then, no doubt, finding the change
unpleasant, crawled back in again. (30)

Though the effect is comical, this is what the whole novel will be about. The soul, like "our earliest ancestors," finds birth, a change, unpleasant, and attempts to go back. The womb is analogous to "the primeval slime" (the blood of the first age), and the soul/body desires to crawl back in again and return to prenatal existence. In this chapter, then, I will look at the evidence of Eugene's desire to return to the womb, in whatever ways the desire manifests itself. One of those manifestations is sex, so I will first trace the development of Eugene's sexuality.

Eugene's Sexuality

When he first goes to school, Eugene sits next to a fourteen-year-old German boy named Otto Krause on one side and a voluptuous girl named Bessie Barnes on the other. Otto draws obscene pictures for Bessie, who responds approvingly. Eugene fixates on

Bessie: she "walked in his brain" (75). He starts drawing lewd pictures with Otto (who contrasts with Max Isaacs, Eugene's mentor in penmanship) and soon after takes up composition of bawdy lyrics.

Now that he knows how to read, he lets himself become engulfed in romance novels, "looking for women in whom blood ran hotly, whose breath was honey, and whose soft touch a spurting train of fire" (85). His imagination takes off from these romances, and puts Eugene in the hero's place, much as Freud would expect the ego to work out its wish-fulfillment through daydreaming. The fantasy returns his mind to Bessie Barnes, after which his daydreaming becomes less chivalrous and more physically sexual. He imagines seeing a "fruity wide-hipped Jewess bathing on her roof," and possessing her; he dreams of executing "le droit de seigneur upon the choicest of the enfeoffed wives and wenches" (90).

Dixieland, Eliza's boarding house, affords Eugene's sexuality many opportunities for development. Many of the women who stay there are sexually free. Eugene is attracted to some of them, and some are attracted to him. He witnesses several affairs that start in the house, including ones that his brothers have with boarders.

But the house itself, in contrast to the sexual life that is within it, comes to represent an evil, anti-life force. As we will see, when Eliza moves into Dixieland, Eugene is at first

fascinated with the progress his mother is caught up in. But he becomes ashamed of Dixieland. "He felt thwarted, netted, trapped" (112), and he comes to see Eliza as part of the "petty cruelty of village caste" (113). Later, when Eliza asks him to "'drum up trade' among the arriving tourists at the station," he imagines himself hawking, and saying "This way, sir, for Dixieland, . . . All the comforts of the the Modern Jail" (187). In fact, it is more like a prison-house of the soul than a home. His better home had been W.O.'s house. Dixieland is for Eliza merely a money-making venture.

And it is a house of sickness and death in the winter. In this way, it represents a horrible kind of death, a death-in-life that contrasts sharply with, for example, W.O.'s death in Of Time and the River. These two views of death are part of Wolfe's vitalist philosophy, as Bella Kussy explains it. Eliza's house in winter is "the absence of vitality, the root of all that is really evil and unpardonable." In contrast, W.O.'s death is the "last of his colossal vital experiences." It is actually a fight against death. He "dies with so vast a cataclysm of his huge physical frame, that the predominant impression with which we are left is not one of the final inanimateness but rather one of the tremendous vitality with which he dies" (Kussy 309).

Eliza's concern for making money contributes to Dixieland's death-in-life character. She takes in boarders with communicable diseases, pretending their condition to be less serious than it

is. She reacts similarly when Helen complains about the number of prostitutes she takes in: "It was part of her protective mechanism. She pretended to be proudly oblivious to any disagreeable circumstance which brought her in money" (LHA 119). In the chilly house, a woman dies of typhoid, and a tubercular man's condition worsens until he enters a sanitarium in the spring, where he dies. Later, Ben will die of pneumonia, aided by both the coldness of "the barn" and Eliza's pretending that Ben is not "half as bad off as he looks" (451).

But things brighten in the summer. The immediate attention in this transition is placed on the "slow-bodied women from the hot rich South" who come to stay at Dixieland (116). Eugene sees "the yielding stealthy harlotry of the South--the dark seclusion of their midnight bodies, their morning innocence. Desire, with bloody beak, tore at his heart like jealous virtue" (116).

One of the women who come to stay at Dixieland in the summer is the sensual Mrs. Selbourne, who cheats widely on her husband and eventually hooks up with Eugene's oldest brother Steve. Steve is a ne'er-do-well who gets drunk almost as much as W.O. He carries a bitterness toward the world, which he believes owes him a living. He has just returned from "a year of vagabondage" in New Orleans when he meets Mrs. Selbourne. Her laughter, like the abundance of the earth around her, is "rich and full" (121). Eugene has a crush on her. She represents "love and maternity" for him.

But sexuality is an area where Eugene seems to get sidetracked from his search, believing that he will find reality and happiness in what it presents to his adolescent mind. He wants to be loved and famous (89). But rather than leading Eugene to or through the sought door, sex actually takes him further away from the object of his search.

The loss of Eugene's virginity is hinted at when he has his paper-route. He can, says the retiring paperboy, get "poon-tang" any time he wants from certain customers. And Wolfe writes, "His need for the Negroes had become acute" (250). One might believe he is talking about sex here, especially since Eliza seems to think her son's hyper behavior is due to new-found coital pleasure. "He was wired like a race-horse. A white atom of inchoate fury would burst in him like a rocket, and for a moment he would be cursing mad" (250). But his behavior is actually due to the reveries he has during the route (which I will discuss in the next chapter), combined with the advent of spring.

Actually, it is not until Eugene goes to college (at age sixteen) that he will have intercourse. It almost happens with the waitress Louise on the trip to Charleston, at an earlier age, but Eugene, thinking Louise is still a virgin, is too chivalrous to "start someone."

Nevertheless, Wolfe's description of the incident conveys Eugene's sense that sex is a possible door to the lost world. In spite of the aborted attempt at copulation in the hotel room, he

thinks he is in love with Louise. They are playful later while swimming in the ocean. He sees his affair with her as a kind of baptism into the world of sex, where surely he will find the object of his search. His swimming is an "immersion." When he leads Louise by the hand into the water, they are "intitiated." Like the "wall of light" that fiend-voices urge Eugene to break through at the beginning of his paper-route (cf. 224), like the "green walls of fantasy" through which he sees apparitions of his kinfolk while he is in a train-ride reverie (cf. 297), the ocean here at Newport is described in terms of something "green" and something of a wall. Max Isaacs, the boyhood friend Eugene looks up to, slides "swiftly through a surging wall of green water" (305). Max will break through the prenatal wall by joining the navy--by traveling beyond the coast of birth. Eugene can break through that wall too--sexually. He and Louise, thus,

bucked deliciously through a roaring wall of water,
and, while her eyes were still closed, he caught her
to him with young salty kisses. (305)

All three--Max, Eugene, and Louise--are metaphorically returning to the womb. Elsewhere, Wolfe uses imagery of the sea, relating it to memory and the past, comparing it to the womb:

Shall these eyes, drenched with visions yet unseen,
stored with the viscous and interminable seas at dawn,
. . . seal up their cold dead dreams upon a tick
. . . ? (276)

The sea is our common ancestor; we all contain the ancient sea in our blood and the other fluids of our body. Here, at Newport, Max, Eugene, and Louise enter that ancient sea again. Louise's eyes are closed, as those of a fetus. Max's "body glimmered greenly for a moment; he stood erect wiping his eyes and shaking water from his ears" (305), rather like a newborn might do, if it had such control over itself.

When they come out of the water, Louise shivers; she is uncomfortable, as a newborn would be, having newly left the warmth of the womb. Eugene wishes for her to be kept in something like that prenatal state, so he molds "sand over her legs and hips, until she was half-buried" (305).

In spite of Louise's prediction to Eugene that he will forget her, he believes he has found in her an answer to his search. "They were hill-born," Wolfe writes. Though they are at the sea, Eugene believes he is in the hills, or "on cloud nine," in other words. We remember from an earlier chapter that the hills represent immortality: "They were . . . beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change" (158).

The episode with Louise is the closest Eugene has come to coitus so far. She is not mentioned again in the novel; indeed, Eugene seems to have forgotten about her, as she predicted. But because of the experience, he is encouraged in his search for an answer through sex.

When the time comes for Eugene to lose what some may call the last vestige of one's childhood, Wolfe brings in the door imagery. Eugene's college peers take him to their favorite brothel in nearby Exeter one night. Eugene waits in the shadow of a tree on the street, while his friends meet a man who leads them to the house matron. Eugene notices the side door they enter and wonders why "there were always latticed doors" (339). Not only that, when they are all in the house, Lily, Eugene's prostitute, says to him, "You go on upstairs, . . . the door's open," and Eugene "entered the room with the open door" (341). But though he may be finally about to enter through the door he has sought all his life, the circumstances of this event are much different from that of the affair with Louise. It is not sex for the sake of love or for the sake of reaching the lost world; it is sex as proving oneself as a man. It is the boys' "bought unlovely loves" (339). There is an element of peer-pressure from his friends, who are described as "the pleased corrupters of chastity" (338). One of them says to Eugene, "It'll make a man of you" (338), which is actually the opposite of what Eugene wants. Eugene's conscience questions his reason for being there: "In him the ghost, his stranger, turned grievously away." And later, "Why am I here? This is not I, he thought" (341).

Whether he actually has intercourse is ambiguous. The passage ends with Eugene losing his passion as he lies down with

Lily. Later, he vomits outside. But he returns later in the week, feeling that "no more of him . . . could be lost" (343).

The world becomes dark for him after this incident, which he regards as "his sin." He is afflicted with lice and "haunted by his own lost ghost: he knew it to be irrecoverable" (343). Has he lost the "ghost," the "angel," the spirit of his childhood--and also any hope of passage to the "lost world"?

Eugene's affair with Laura James, during his next summer at home, shows that, in spite of "losing his ghost" during the Exeter affair, he still believes he can find an answer in sexual union. He falls in love with Laura, ignoring the dissimilarities in their ages and values. He is sixteen; she, twenty-one. He is looking for the meaning of life; she keeps herself busy buying clothes. He just spent a year at college, being taunted by upperclassmen and feeling envious of fraternity "swells," in spite of their in-grouping and social snobbery; she, when learning that he attends Pulpit Hill, yet belongs to no fraternity, displays her high regard for such social institutions.

"Do you know the two Barlow boys? They're Sigma Nus," said Laura James.

He had seen them. They were great swells, football men.

"Yes, I know them," he said, "Roy Barlow and Jack Barlow."

"Do you know 'Snooks' Warren? He's a Kappa Sig."

"Yes. They call them Keg Squeezers," said

Eugene.

Yet he falls in love with her. And although there seems to be no attempt at coitus, Eugene is led to her as if she will open the unfound door, or at least show him the way to it. They meet each night on the porch at Dixieland: "By the door, in the darkness, he found Laura James" (361). He is still groping. She, because of the beauty he thinks he sees in her, is a light. She is physically ugly, but Eugene sees a Platonic kind of beauty in her:

All the young beauty in the world dwelt for him in
that face that had kept wonder, that had kept
innocency, that had lived in such immortal blindness
to the terror and foulness of the world. (363)

Eugene sees the child in her: that is the way he wishes to travel in his journey to the prenatal life. Though she is five years older than him, he feels older. To him, "she was a virgin, crisp like celery." He is more experienced, having been to Exeter. Louise symbolizes his hope to recover his innocence. "His heart shrank away from the pollution of his touch upon her" (363).

She is engaged to be married to someone else, however. She keeps it a secret from him; perhaps she feels sorry for him, who lives with a parsimonious mother and a dying father who still has drunken rampages. She makes a couple of attempts to let him down

easily, but their love escalates, and she lets things happen as they will.

Her first attempt at escape is through pointing to the difference in their ages. Eugene feels it does not matter. Laura replies, "It does! It matters so much!" And the fact is, in this world age and time do matter. And Louise is part of this world, more than Eugene suspects. Here Wolfe is using his idea about mortal, chronological time in contrast to "time immutable." In The Story of a Novel, he wrote,

There were three time elements in [my] material. The first . . . was . . . actual present time, an element that carried the narrative forward, which represented characters and events as living in the present time and moving forward into an immediate future. The second . . . was an element of past time, one which represented these same characters as acting and as being acted upon not only by the events and conflicts of the life around them, but by all the accumulated impact of man's memory and experience so that each moment of his life was conditioned not only by what he saw and felt and did and experienced in that moment, but by all that he had seen and felt and done and experienced and had been in the process of becoming up to that moment. . . . There was a third [element, . . . time immutable], as time fixed, unchanging, subject neither to past or present time, as,

the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth; as time everlasting, a kind of eternal and unchanging world and universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day.

(SN 51)

Eugene is looking for that world of time immutable, which characterizes the prenatal life and where time does not matter. Laura's emphasis on the age difference between her and Eugene is the first sign that she cannot help him find that world.

Still, Eugene believes and hopes. The two go on a picnic on a hill outside town one day, and the ascent up the hill is narrated in terms of an ascent to paradise. The woods become greener, cooler, and moister as the two ascend, until what represents the source of the lost river is discovered: "Eugene felt thirsty. Further along, the escape from a smaller reservoir roared from a pipe in a foaming hawser, as thick as a man's body" (375). From the summit, Eugene has a mystical view of the town below: "it lay before them with the sharp nearness of a Sienese picture, at once close and far." The phrase "at once close and far" is reminiscent of other Wolefean paradoxes that suggest timelessness or infinity: "forever far-near"; "combination of fixity and change."

Further, the ground where the two settle for their picnic is described as an Eden, complete with a garter snake with a "forked tongue." "Laura cried out," and Eugene finally gets to live out

his boyhood fantasy of saving the damsel and winning her affection. Also, the stoning of the snake is his attempt to change the outcome of the Hebrew myth. This Eden will remain open to them.

As they lay, finally, on the ground, Eugene asks Laura what time it is, but "he scarcely heard her. . . . 'What do I care what time it is!'" (378). Again, he feels he has reached a world where time does not matter.

The disillusionment comes when Eugene brings up a subject they had discussed the night before. He had asked her to wait for him and to love him forever. "I am going all over the world. I shall go away for years at a time; I shall become famous, but I shall always come back to you" (363). Laura had said yes the night before, but now, during the picnic, she makes her second attempt at letting Eugene down. She brings up the age difference again, saying "You're only a child. I'm so old--a grown woman" (378). Eugene tries to minimize the significance of the age difference. She says he has no plans for the future, but he insists he knows how his life will be. Then she makes a hint about marriage, saying that at her age, most girls think about getting married. He accuses her of hiding from him a fiancé--as well as other "fellows" who "feel your legs, . . . play with your breasts."

Eugene becomes distraught and realizes that something has changed in him. He has grown "sadder and wiser," like Coleridge's ancient mariner.

Nakedly, with breast bare to horror, he scourged himself, knowing in the moment that the nightmare cruelty of life is not in the remote and fantastic, but in the probable--the horror of love, loss, marriage, the ninety seconds treason in the dark.

. . .

He seized her fiercely, unable to speak. Then he buried his face in her neck.

"Laura! My dear! My sweet! Don't leave me alone! I've been alone! I've always been alone!"

"It's what you want, dear. It's what you'll always want. . . ." (379)

She promises he will "forget this ever happened. You'll forget me. You'll forget--forget" (379). Forgetting is growing up, leaving childhood. But Eugene swears he will never forget, and the narrator comments,

. . . who shall say . . . that we ever forget magic, or that we can ever betray, on this leaden earth, the apple-tree, the singing, and the gold? (380)

Eugene's relationship with Margaret Leonard, wife of the schoolmaster, John Dorsey Leonard, is more symbolic of what he really wants. Margaret, like Eliza, wants Eugene to remain a

child. But the two women go about their attempts in different ways. Eliza wants to keep Eugene "her baby" and wants him to remain umbilically attached to her womb. "He was riven into her flesh." Margaret "knows the hearts of little boys. . . . They were her little gods." She wants Eugene to keep his child's innocence, but she lays heavy emphasis on growth of the mind. She wants him to read toward knowledge and wisdom. There is no sexual connection between Margaret and Eugene, however, as we shall see there is between Eugene and Eliza. One never reads that Margaret and Eugene are "riven into each other's flesh." She is a mother to him, worried about his health, his sleeping and eating habits, reluctant to let him go off to college, unbelieving when she hears about his involvement with a girl. But there is no umbilical connection between the two, and there will be no sexual attraction.

Their meeting comes at a time in his early adolescence when he still fantasizes about Bessie Barnes, who displays "her long full silken leg," after which Eugene groans to himself, "Open for me the gates of delight" (170). And a gate, of course, is a door. The womb/vagina is a door through which he might pass in his search.

But he is also developing a variation of his old fantasies of chivalrous romance. He is attracted to a girl named Ruth and thinks of "a wild life with Bessie and of a later resurrection, a pure holy life, with Ruth" (170).

This progression leads naturally to a more Platonic love in which a relationship of minds is better than a union of bodies. Wolfe introduces Margaret Leonard abruptly, breaking into Eugene's fantasy of romance with a former teacher:

. . . if only here, alone, with the big plaster cast of Minerva, himself and Bessie Barnes, or Miss--Miss--

"We want this boy, said Margaret Leonard. She handed Eugene's paper over to her husband. (173)

Eugene's first impression of Margaret is of her fragility. She is tubercular and thin, no heavier than 80 or 90 pounds. Her husband is a big, muscular man. When Eugene learns that the Leonards have two children, he immediately thinks--with horror--of the parents' sexuality, and the possibility of her being crushed.

After the initial meeting, however, Eugene becomes spiritually attracted to Margaret. Though her outward appearance is one of decay, she has a "passionate calm beauty that fed her inexhaustibly from within" (177).

If he noticed her emaciation at all now, it was only with a sense of her purification: he felt himself in union not with disease, but with the greatest health he had ever known. She made a high music in him. His heart lifted. . . . [Her] voice had in it that quality of quiet wonder that he had sometimes heard in the voices of people who had seen or were told of some strange event, or coincidence, that seemed to reach

beyond life, beyond nature--a note of acceptance; and suddenly he knew that all life seemed eternally strange to this woman, that she looked directly into the beauty and the mystery and the tragedy in the hearts of men, and that he seemed beautiful to her.

(177)

Even later, when Eugene visits the Leonards during his first university summer, "Margaret looked thin and ill, but the great light in her seemed on this account to burn more brightly" (397). She possesses a quality he covets, transcendence. So he believes he can possess it too if he follows her. He looks up to her, in a very Platonic sense: "He turned his face up to her as a prisoner who recovers light" (178).

Both Margaret and Eugene see that they can fulfill each other's needs. She can feed his "ravenous hunger for knowledge, experience, wisdom," and thus feel successful in her vocation, and he will have someone to chart "the way through the passage to India" for him: "the wild ignorant groping, the blind hunt, the desperate baffled desire was now to be ruddered, guided, controlled" (179).

She becomes his spiritual mother, contrasting sharply with his biological mother. In fact, John Dorsey Leonard is closer to Eliza in that he hopes that his school will give him power and prosperity, just as Eliza wants property, power, and prosperity. For Margaret, teaching is its own reward. It is part of her own

search for the Platonic world of Forms; teaching is the world in which plastically she built to beauty what was good" (179).

Margaret gives Eugene a sense of optimism. His change from childhood to adolescence brings with it a loss of grasp on the vision of prenatal life: "O death in life that turns our men to stone! O change that levels down our gods!" he laments. Must the vision be totally lost? Must we cease to be gods when we grow up? The narrator is hopeful:

If only one lives yet, above the cinders of the
consuming years, shall not this dust awaken, shall not
dead faith revive, shall we not see God again, as once
in morning, on the mountain? Who walks with us on the
hills? (179-180)

Eugene's hope now is that it is Margaret that will walk with him on the hills. She holds out hope that it is still possible to retain the beautiful vision in adult life.

At the same time Eugene's spiritual attraction for Margaret develops, his sexuality seems to become dormant. He still has sexual fantasies, but it is his classmates who now make all the lewd remarks, "writhe erotically" in their seats over a sexy female teacher, and enjoy sexual encounters with young wenches in wooded areas (cf. 183, 185, 194). In fact, Eugene witnesses his older brothers making love to women and feels either sick or bitterly jealous. He chances upon Steve with a boarder and feels sick, perhaps because he is too absorbed in the "higher life" to

enjoy, even vicariously, any sort of sexuality. He is jealous when Luke gets involved with Mrs. Selbourne and her daughter Delia, perhaps because he wants his older brother to be spiritual too.

Margaret Leonard may not be the clue Eugene is looking for, however. It turns out that she would oppose Eugene's employment as a paper boy (because of "health undermined, . . . the promise of future years destroyed, of the sweet lost hours of morning sleep that could never be regained"--254). But it is on his route, in the "prenatal morning" that Eugene has his transcendental experiences, as we will see in the next chapter. Thus, Margaret, though she means well in trying to set Eugene on the right path of knowledge and wisdom, is more of a hindrance in the end.

She introduces him to poetry, believing that it will guard the flame that she sees burning in "her heroes, her little gods"--boys. Eugene is excited about poetry, and reads "almost every major lyric in the language" (255). But poetry is little more than sublimation of his childhood fantasies:

He committed to memory the entire passage in the Anabasis, the mounting and triumphal Greek which described the moment when the starving remnant of the Ten Thousand has come at length to the sea, and sent up their great cry, calling it by name. (255)

He had already learned in grammar school the Wordsworthian lyrics celebrating childhood, the prenatal life, and the strange workings of memory: "My heart leaps up," "I wandered lonely as a cloud," and "Behold her, single in the field." But Margaret introduces more Wordsworth, including "The world is too much with us."

Margaret is very wrapped up in academics and an American's sentimental nostalgia for England. She becomes extremely sentimental when she talks about England. As Albert Vogel notices, she romanticizes the lives of the authors she reads and distorts "the meaning of their writing so as to always point to the highest levels of Christian or of Victorian morality" (283-284). She has big plans for Eugene's education following his stay at the Leonards' school:

For two years he had romanced with Margaret Leonard about his future education. It was proposed that, in view of his youth, he should attend Vanderbilt (or Virginia) for two years, go to Harvard for two years more, and then, having arrived by easy stages at Paradise, "top things off" with a year or two at Oxford. (321)

Thus, she seems more interested in seeing Eugene fit into her image of a young scholar than in his quest for the lost world.

Eugene returns to Altamont for the summer after his first year at Pulpit Hill. After his affair with Laura James, and the anguish that follows, he becomes involved with "Miss Brown," a

prostitute staying at Dixieland. Such brief affairs will characterize his sexuality for the rest of the novel. He is still "groping in the dark," and still finds a door to enter: Miss Brown's was "slightly ajar" (392). But he also pays several visits to the Leonards, and Margaret still has that Platonic effect on him. She is a light amid the darkness of his "sin" and groping:

All of his sin, all of his pain, all the vexed
weariness of his soul were washed away in that deep
radiance: the tumult and evil of life dropped from him
its foul and ragged cloak. He seemed to be clothed
anew in garments of seamless light. (397)

Let us now look more specifically at the ways Eugene attempts a return to prenatal life through the womb or through something that symbolizes the womb, such as the earth.

In Search of the Womb

Even before he acquires language, Eugene smells and desires the food that the rest of the Gants are eating. Later, after the death of Grover, Wolfe portrays the life of the Gants and narrows in on the abundance of food in their household. W.O. Gant not only brings home great hordes of food from the market, he harvests much from his own earth. Eugene views the richness in sexual terms: "The earth was spermy for him like a big woman." The boy tries to imitate that woman: he "filled his distending belly until

it was drum-tight, and was permitted to stop eating by his watchful sire only when his stomach was impregnable to the heavy prod of Gant's big finger" (55). Impregnating himself with food gives him sexuality and directs his attention to his genital area. If he cannot return to the earlier life through his mother's womb, he will have to do so through his developing sexuality. The soul is searching for the way home (looking homeward), though not looking at the actual home.

At the same time that Eugene tries to return through the womb, Eliza refuses to let him go from her womb. He continues to sleep with her up to age eight. "He was riven into her flesh" (107). When Eliza buys the boarding house Dixieland, W.O. stays in the family house on Woodson Street. Eliza takes Eugene with her.

He was the last tie that bound her to all the weary life of breast and cradle; he still slept with her of nights; she was like some swimmer who ventures out into a dark and desperate sea, not wholly trusting to her strength and destiny, but with a slender cord bound to her which stretches still to land. (106)

She refuses to cut the umbilical cord. In fact, whenever she realizes Eugene is at his father's house, she calls at night on the telephone, demanding his return.

Eliza's clinging to Eugene does not represent the way back home. Wolfe writes that Eugene "gained another roof and lost

forever the tumultuous, unhappy, warm centre of his home" (107). This is another kind of leaving the womb. Even though life at W.O.'s house had been "tumultuous" and "unhappy," Eugene was at least secure; at Dixieland, on the other hand, "he had from day to day no clear idea where the day's food, shelter, lodging was to come from" (107). He is more on his own now than he was before, even though the maternal hold is still upon him. Being more on his own, he is subject to corruption by the cares of this world. And he is subject to corruption by Eliza's materialism, which is in sharp contrast to the anti-materialism of W.O. "Gant and Eliza were opposites," Rubin says. "Wolfe seemed to see them as Ulysses and Penelope, the far-wanderer and the wife at home" (Rubin, 1955, 130).

Eliza's materialism is manifested in her hunger to accumulate property. She "saw Altamont not as so many hills, buildings, people: she saw it in the pattern of a gigantic blueprint" (LHA 104). She sees the place not in its wholeness, but in its potentiality to be parceled out into profit-making pieces. Her last name, Pentland, as David O'Rourke discovers, is indicative of her materialistic character. "Pent" is the past participle of the verb "to pen," meaning to enclose or confine. "As, perhaps, the representative family of the fallen world of the South, it is through the commercial greed which the Pentlands exemplify that the South becomes the hell microcosmically presented in Altamont" (O'Rourke 22n). "There'll be a street through here some day,"

Eliza says, excited about progress and prospects. One is reminded that the romantic poets found thinking of Eliza's sort anathema: Blake, whose "mind-forg'd" Londoners wandered through "each charter'd street"; Wordsworth, who in The Prelude exalted the benefits of nature and became stifled in the city. Eliza not only thrives on society-produced disjointedness, she seems to gloat over it: "she delighted in bringing suit against people, or in having suit brought against her. She always won" (112).

"They'll put a street behind there some day," she repeats. These are not passages she is talking about, in the sense of Eugene's search for the "lost lane-end into heaven." They are passages in the sense of leading customers to her boarding house, but in a deeper sense they are lines that cut up the place, secure every individual's private space (and decrease shared space), and give humanity a disconnectedness.

Yet Eugene is for a time caught up in the excitement of progress too. It is sexual:

. . . there was surging into these chosen hills the strong thrust of the world, like a kissing tide, which swings lazily in with a slapping glut of waters, and recoils into its parent crescent strength, to be thrown farther inward once again. (111)

Eugene sees that Eliza had vision when she bought Dixieland. The streets that had been clay ten years earlier were now being paved. This paving is also described in sexual terms: "he saw the odorous

pressed tongue of pavement lengthen out, a swelling ecstasy" (111).

Eugene does not see that the mountains surrounding Altamont are being raped by progress. He is fascinated because progress is doing something close to what he wants to do himself, make a passage. He wants a passage to the lost world; progress, symbolized most closely for Eugene by his mother, is helping people find just such a passage: Eliza knows that "men and women withered by the desert would seek an oasis, . . . that those panting on the plains would look into the hills for comfort and relief" (111).

W.O.'s feelings toward material things, property, and possessions are in sharp contrast to Eliza's. We learn this at their very first meeting, when Eliza sells him some books. "She continued to talk about property with a strange meditative hunger" (10). He responds by saying, "I hope I never own another piece of property as long as I live--save a house to live in. It is nothing but a curse and a care. . . . All the property I need is eight feet of earth to be buried in" (10, 11).

After they marry, W.O. builds a house, which to him is "the picture of his soul, the garment of his will. But for Eliza it was a piece of property" (14). Now, when Eliza buys Dixieland, W.O. does not attempt to stifle her material ambitions, but he wants no part of them himself. Property is still "a curse and a care."

There is something very much of the classical Greek in W.O., be it philosopher, rhetorician, mystic, artist, or dionysian. He is a stonecutter whose lifelong search is for the perfect form: he wants to sculpt an angel. As a boy of fifteen, he had seen carved figures--"lambs and cherubim, and an angel poised upon cold phthisic feet, with a smile of soft stone idiocy" (4)--in a shop window and

felt that he wanted, more than anything in the world, to carve delicately with a chisel. He wanted to wreak something dark and unspeakable in him into cold stone. He wanted to carve an angel's head. . . . He never found it. (4)

W.O. is trying to attain something like the "free and active embodiment of the Idea in the shape peculiarly appropriate to the Idea itself in its essential nature" which Hegel sees in classical Greek sculpture (Hegel 77). "Art in Greece," Hegel says, "has become the supreme expression of the Absolute" (438). But since W.O. cannot carve an angel's head, he orders a marble angel from Italy to place in his Altamont shop. He treasures this piece. When "Queen Elizabeth," the proprietor of the local brothel, comes to purchase it for the grave of one of her girls, W.O. is reluctant to sell it. It is as if he were giving away the angel of his blissful, visionary youth. The angel symbolizes that which gives meaning to W.O.'s life: "He knew he had nothing to cover or

obliterate that place--it left a barren crater in his heart"
(222).

Wolfe also gives us a picture of W.O. as philosopher, discussing politics like Socrates when he visits Dixieland at night and sits on the porch with the boarders. The boarders do not always agree with him, but feel "he had a fine head and would have gone far in politics" (111).

W.O.'s style is very much that of an orator. His use of rhetoric seems to come naturally to him. When the town turns out in "wet" camps and "dry" camps to vote on the "local option," W.O. finds himself condemning liquor in front of a group of supporting ladies:

"Licker," he said, "is a curse and a care. It has caused the sufferings of untold millions. . . . It has brought poverty, disease, and suffering to hundreds of thousands of homes, broken the hearts of wives and mothers, and taken bread from the mouths of little orphaned children." (235)

The boarders on the porch recognize his oratorical ability; the Negro servants recognize it when he comes to berate Eliza ("Dat man sho' can tawk!"--108); and men had recognized it before, in the early years of his and Eliza's marriage ("Men heard at night and morning the great formula of his curse to Eliza"--15). His father, Gilbert, had "grandiose speech and was fond of playing Hamlet." W.O. himself would read to the infant Eugene

with sonorous and florid rhetoric passages from Shakespeare, among which he heard most often Marc Antony's funeral oration, Hamlet's soliloquy, the banquet scene in Macbeth, and the scene between Desdemona and Othello before he strangles her.

(50-51)

One wonders if he saw himself in Othello's place when he berated Eliza.

It is perhaps significant that, when Eliza moves into Dixieland, Helen stays with W.O., "as if it had been known anciently and forever" (106). Elsewhere in Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe writes, "The love of Luke and Helen was epic" (198). Furthermore, Eugene and Helen become objects of a small war between the two households. The two camps, between which Eugene is passed as war-spoil, are contrasted much in the spirit of Matthew Arnold's Hellenism and Hebraism:

. . . the powerful charm of Gant's house, of its tacked and added whimsy, its male smell, its girdling rich vines, its great gummed trees, its roaring internal seclusiveness, the blistered varnish, the hot calfskin, the comfort and abundance, seduced him easily away from the great chill tomb of Dixieland.

(108)

Though Helen, on the other hand, is not abducted by Eliza, she nevertheless serves in a foreign court. When Eliza has

trouble with the Negro servants, she calls Helen over to help serve the boarders their meals. These boarders are very fond of her, noticing her "consuming vitality." Her face at times is "transparently radiant and handsome," as Helen of Troy's, the most beautiful woman of the classical world, must have been (109).

Wolfe seems then to be setting up a dichotomy--W.O. representing an Athenian spiritualism, and Eliza representing materialism and lack of light. He seems to be suggesting that W.O. represents Athens, where Eugene may be closer (through philosophy) to finding the real way home, and Eliza represents Troy, the barbaric world of flesh and material possession, where his soul will only be weighted down. Eliza's calling him back to the womb, as well as the promise of progress, are illusory paths to happiness.

But Eugene also sees the earth as a mother, and thinks of it in terms of womb. The earth is fertile, yielding an abundance of food and drink. Images of plums dropping from trees occur throughout the novel. There are often big feasts at W.O.'s house. Eugene sees his father and his brother Steve drink heavily and, though frightened by their extreme behavior, sees alcohol as a possible key to the higher life. He regards alcohol as not so much something evil, but as a product of the earth.

Eventually, he links in his imagination the abundance of food and the fertile earth mother from which it springs. Immediately, he wants to reach the source of this abundance, which he sees in

terms of a womb. As in other cases, his inchoate fantasizing is the start of a higher awareness of a door that may lead him to prenatal life. He comes out of a movie theater with W.O. one winter night and muses on the fact that his present life is unreal. "His life was the shadow of a shadow." He sees the frozen city around him, late at night, and thinks, "This is really like a city of the dead." He wants to find other buried cities: Troy, Atlantis, Ville d'Ys. He imagines being alone "with a group of pretty women" in a deserted town, imbibing endlessly on fine food and drink, having sexual satisfaction always available.

Then his mind focuses in on the indescribable land that is the object of his search, but for which he has been unable to find a passage. "He groped for the doorless land of faery, that illimitable haunted country that opened somewhere below a leaf or a stone" (229).

Unable to concretize this land in his imagination, he combines the elements that he knows so far: buried cities, earth's abundance, and womb, and sees the hidden land as

great mansions in the ground, grottoes buried in the deep heart of a hill, vast chambers of brown earth. . . . He would pull fat fish from subterranean pools, his great earth cellars would be stocked with old wine, he could loot the world of its treasures, including the handsomest women, and never be caught. . . . Naked came I from my mother's womb. Naked shall I return. Let the mothering

womb of earth engulf me. Naked, a valiant wisp of man,
in vast brown limbs engulfed. (229)

Later in the novel, after the death of Ben, Eugene will regard the earth as something which covers our dead bodies and as the medium by which, in regeneration, we attain immortality. "'Old Ben will turn into lovely flowers. Roses, I think,'" says Mrs. Pert, Ben's friend and mistress (484). The earth is a womb in which a dying human (like a dying fertility god) plants his seed and rises again in a new birth.

Again, we can see the difference between W.O. and Eliza in regard to the earth. To Eliza, the earth is potential property, something to be owned; to W.O., it is something to explore, something to enjoy (along with its fruits), and something to receive the body again at death. W.O. struggles against "the terrible will that wanted to own the earth more than explore it" (57). To explore the earth is the way to get to know it. This becomes Eugene's quest too, and it is useful to remember the sexual, Elizabethan connotation of "to know." Seeing the earth as a womb, as a fertile lover/mother, not as something to be raped (as in Eliza's notion of progress), but something to be loved and to return to, prepares Eugene for acceptance of Ben's death--and his own.

THE LOGOS

The second major way Eugene sees as a possible passage to prenatal existence is through language, specifically a "lost language," a "word that all men knew and had forgotten" (245).

As an infant, Eugene plays with wooden blocks carved with letters of the alphabet. Somehow, he knows that these constitute a key to discovering reality. He knows that "he had here the stones of the temple of language, and [strives] desperately to find the key that would draw order and intelligence from this anarchy" (32).

Soon after, when he imitates the moo of Swain's cow, he feels that "that wall had been breached" (33). "That wall" is the wall of language, but also the wall separating him from the lost world. In imitation, he has found the key to language. His father is proud of him, and has Eugene repeat his first word for all the neighbors. It is as if W.O. is welcoming Eugene to the company of those who have discovered the Word, or who at least have the ability to speak it.

When first in school, at age six, he learns to write, especially under the guidance of classmate Max Isaacs. He sees, "with a cry in his throat," . . . [the] line of life, that beautiful developing structure of language. . . . He could feel the opening gates in him, the plunge of the tide, the escape" (71). It is perhaps significant that Wolfe follows this passage with a description of Eugene and Max coming across workmen in a

deep pit, fixing a broken water-main. Behind the workmen's backs "there was a wide fissure, a window in the earth which opened on some dark subterranean passage" (71). This pit and the water-main that runs through it represent the "buried life." The workmen are symbolic of all mystics who are looking for the "lost forgotten language," represented by the water that flows underground.

About this time of life, Eugene's springtimes are characterized by something of the ineffable. He hears "an inarticulate promise: he had been pierced by spring, that sharp knife" (78). The spring wakes something in Eugene, but he does not know what that something is. He has no words for his feeling. His desire goads him further in the exploration of books; he spends as much time as he can in the library, wading in romances and adventures, entering into fantasy worlds where he might find some answer to the inarticulate desire in him.

When he enrolls in the Leonards' school, he is spiritually attracted to Margaret Leonard, as we have seen. She is interested in what he has been reading and hopes to guide him in his search for knowledge, wisdom, and experience. She too is looking for the Word--for articulation of the life of the soul. Teaching, for her, is "the world in which plastically she built to beauty what was good" (179). "What was good" is the collection of Forms of the prenatal life. Her attempt at articulation of those Forms will be to reconstruct them "plastically" into objects of beauty.

She is, like W.O. in his attempt to carve an angel, an artist who seeks to imitate the Forms of nature.

Eugene regards her as his soul-mate. He hopes to learn from her something he cannot learn amid the squalor and confusion of his home--not even from the Athenian W.O.--the way to discover the Word.

He opened one window of his heart to Margaret,
together they entered the sacred grove of poetry; but
all dark desire, the dream of fair forms, and all the
misery, drunkenness, and disorder of his life at home
he kept fearfully shut. He was afraid they would
hear. (186-187)

In his fourteenth year, Eugene has a paper-route in "Niggertown." He rises at 3:30 each morning to start the route: Wolfe calls it the "prenatal morning." Darkness and silence make an "unreal humming in his drugged ears." "Fiend-voices" call him to wake up, but also call him back to the life of the soul. They urge him to try "the way" through the wall of light," to "lift up the rock, . . . the leaf, the stone, the unfound door," to return. His waking is a new birth, and he is "umbilically cut, from darkness." The fiend-voices remind him of a word he knew "in the beginning," before his memory became clouded by corporeal existence:

A voice, sleep-strange and loud, forever
far-near, spoke.

Eugene!

Spoke, ceased, continued without speaking, to
speak. In him spoke. Where darkness, son, is light.
Try, boy, the word you know remember. . In the
beginning was the logos. Over the border the
borderless green-forested land. Yesterday, remember?

(245)

Is this "logos" an actual word, a password? Or is Wolfe's use of the word "logos" symbolic of the prenatal existence itself? The passage following suggests that it is a password. Eugene has a vision of a world filled with "silent marching men," among whom

no word was spoken, but in the heart of each there was
a common knowledge, the word that all men knew and had
forgotten, the lost key opening the prison gates, the
lane-end into heaven, and as the music soared and
filled him, he cried, "I will remember. When I come
to the place, I shall know. (245)

In The Web and the Rock George Webber is in a similar search for a lost world. When he has his sharpest feelings that an escape to the "golden life" is possible, he experiences "wordless joy." "He never found a word for it, but he had a thousand spells and prayers and images that would give it coherence, shape, and meanings that no words could do" (WR 83). Although this is more of an attempt to articulate his joy, it is also a way to recall it at will, especially since Wolfe refers to the Word as a spell or

prayer. In this way, George Webber's naming process is like an ancient belief that names hold power, that if one knows another's name, one has an ability to control that other. This is part of the reason for the ancient Hebrew taboo of speaking God's name.

But what is this place Eugene expects to come to, when he says, "When I come to the place, I shall know"? It may be death, for in this vision too he realizes that "all who lived or had lived [converge] on a plain" of death. In that case, Eugene would certainly rediscover the Word, since he would then be part of the prenatal life again. But it may also be some "place" in his life, a point at which he is so educated that his knowledge and wisdom will lead him to discovery of the Word. And this Word will be the key to the gate that leads into the buried life.

It is significant that Eugene should have this vision at the beginning of a paper-route, especially a paper-route in "Niggertown." The newspaper office is a well-lit place amid the darkness of the morning, implying perhaps that it is the source of Light. Harry Tugman, the pressman, the medium without whom the Word would not be read, is revered almost as a god by the paperboys, especially by Eugene, who stands in awe of the press, and seems impressed by the fact that Harry Tugman "could travel" if he were not pleased. (We will see in the next chapter how important travel is for Eugene.)

Also, the delivery of the newspaper to the shacks on Eugene's route literally brings light to them. The retiring paper boy

teaches Eugene how to throw the paper "with the speed and accuracy of a ball" (247). The slap of the paper on the porch wakes the residents, who proceed to turn on their light: Eugene makes "incandescent those houses to which a paper was delivered" (247). Figuratively, too, he brings light to "dark" people. The Word enlightens those in darkness. In this respect, he is similar to Margaret Leonard, whom he admires both for the Light in her and her desire to illuminate the boys at the Leonards' school. And as Eugene gives away the Word, his paper bag lightens. It no longer "pulls him earthwards" and he experiences the "aerial ecstasy of release" (248). The more of the Word he gives away, the more divine he becomes.

After Eugene's loss of virginity to the prostitutes at Exeter, and his episode with lice, he feels he has not only sinned but has lost any chance of finding a passage to the lost world. His spirit, thus, loses both the chance to find the Word and the ability to speak: "Within, the Other One, who had no speech, saw" (373). But his spirit revives after a visit to Doctor McGuire and from the promise of hope he receives from Ben, who helps him to see that the incident is not the end of the world. "Finally, as he turned in on the busy avenue, he could restrain himself no longer: he leaped high in the air, with a yelp of ecstasy: 'Squee--ee!'" (346). This is the squeal or goat-cry we hear at other times of uncontrolled ecstasy. Bella Kussy (308) sees it as an expression of a "mystic primitivism" in Eugene (and in George

Webber), which is an aspect of his physical enjoyment of the world--his delight in food and sex, his desire to experience all of life that he can, to consume all the books, women, food, and cities that he can. It is also an affirmation of life amid death-in-life, a celebration of life that Kussy terms "vitalism." Further, the goat-cry usually occurs, as Rubin points out, when Eugene sees some hope of escape (Rubin, 1955, 71). The squeal is an articulation, and may be the Word that opens a door, as well as one that affirms that that door is opened.

Alcoholic intoxication also seems to open the gate of language again, after Eugene's "sin" at Exeter closed it. Home from college for his seventeenth Christmas, Eugene gets drunk on liquor that Luke had brought home for his dying father. Eugene has

a moment of great wonder--the magnificent wonder with
which we discover the simple and unspeakable things
that lie buried and known, but unconfessed, in us. So
might a man feel if he wakened after death and found
himself in Heaven. (412)

The drunkenness returns him to his infancy. In the middle of winter, he goes outside without a coat or hat--metaphorically naked--and has difficulty walking. Friends put him to bed, and when his family comes home and finds him drunk, Luke's words, though mocking, rock him as a mother's arm rocks her infant's cradle:

"Have you no pride? Have you no honor? Has it come to this?" the sailor roared dramatically, striding around the room. . . .

Have you no this? Have you no that? Have you no this? Have you no that?--he was cradled in their rhythm. (414)

Though drunkenness in itself turns out to be a false hope for a way to reveal the Logos (" . . . his tongue thickened until he could not bend it to the cunning sounds of words. He spoke aloud, repeating difficult phrases over and over"), Eugene does have a vision of the complexity of his life now, and the simplicity he must achieve if he is to find the lost world. And that simplicity applies to language just as much as it does to anything else in his life. To the house of Dixieland, as well as to his ghost, he says:

If there's a door in silence, let it open. My silence can be greater than your own. And you who are in me, and who I am, come forth beyond this quiet shell of flesh that makes no posture to deny you. . . . Unweave the fabric of night and days; unwind my life back to my birth; subtract me into nakedness again. (412)

If he is to find a passage, he must find it in silence, or by being silent. The Logos is silence, the unspoken Word. Eugene must be more like Ben, who throughout the novel is referred to as "the quiet one," and who, as we will see, seems to find a passage

to the lost world sooner than Eugene does. Eugene must simply be quiet--meditatively silent. He must be simple and find simplicity--such as the simplicity of a stone, a leaf, or a door. Here we see the similarity of these Wolfean symbols to those of Wordsworth: the rainbow, rose, tree, and pansy of the "Intimations Ode" and "My Heart Leaps Up" are all simple, quiet things. As things which remind one of a life beyond this one, they stand for the eternal and the real, which cannot be spoken about in the language of this life. Eugene must, therefore, quit his frenzied search in books, sex, and travel. Sexual union, for example, seems simple, but aloneness is simpler. In the chapter containing the episode of Eugene's drunkenness, there is a heavier emphasis on Eugene's being alone. His roommate from the fall semester dies of heart failure, and Eugene feels, "I think I shall room alone hereafter" (401). Further on, we learn that he is fitting in better at school: "He was happier. . . . His physical loneliness was more complete and more delightful" (407).

Sex, too, in spite of its ability to give one a sense of ecstasy and transcendence, in spite of its potential to lead a man back to the womb, is nevertheless complex. Eugene finds that out when he discovers that there comes with romantic love the need to combine two totally different lives, two "fabrics" or complex lives that must be first unwoven before they can unite satisfactorily. In other words, before two lovers can get to the

center of each other's persons or essences, they must unwind their two sets of personalities, ambitions, goals and desires.

Similarly, as we shall see in the next chapter, Eugene must also quit his frenzied search in travel and find the answer to one's search in the place of one's birth.

Eugene will find more promise, then, in silence and nothingness. Yet Wolfe seems to end the drunkenness passage pessimistically: "There was nothing but the living silence of the house: no doors were opened" (412). Is it simply because Eugene is drunk that he does not instantly find the lost world, even though he comes to the realization about silence and nothingness?

I believe the answer to this question will become apparent in my conclusion, as well as at the end of the novel, when we will see that it not only requires silence to open the door, but a journey as well. But it is a certain kind of journey. First we must examine the various ways that travel appeals to Eugene and gives him hope that an answer to his questions can be found.

THE JOURNEY

Look Homeward, Angel opens in the spirit of travel:

A destiny that leads the English to the Dutch is strange enough; but one that leads from Epsom into Pennsylvania, and thence into the hills that shut in Altamont over the proud coral cry of the cock, and the soft stone smile of an angel, is touched by that dark miracle of chance which makes new magic in a dusty world. (3)

W.O. Gant had inherited from his father "a passionate and obscure hunger for voyages" (4). It is W.O.'s early travelling that led him to something he found meaningful in life:

. . . the old hunger that had once darkened in the small grey eyes, leading a boy into new lands and toward the soft stone smile of an angel. (57)

As we have seen, the angel in Look Homeward, Angel represents the soul; and W.O.'s life quest is to "wreak something dark and unspeakable in him into cold stone" and to learn how to consummate his art in sculpting an angel.

It is not often after he marries Eliza that he gets the chance to fulfill his wanderlust. "Gant's roving spirit was parched for lack of travel" (125). Most of his trips take place on the occasion of the death or near-death of family members (cf. 58).

Before Eugene starts school at age six, however, Gant makes a journey to California. He is old and dying. Symbolically, he is journeying toward the new frontier and will soon reach the other coast of life that Wordsworth speaks of in the "Intimations Ode." Eugene, on the other hand, makes a trip to Charleston (later), on the east coast--the coast of birth. When he is there, Max Isaacs tries to convince him to join the navy. Though Eugene wants to go to college, he is attracted by Max's idea. It is a way, perhaps, to go beyond the coast of birth.

But his pulse throbbed as he listened to the lonely
thunder of the sea. He saw strange dusky faces, palm
frondage, and heard the little tinkling sounds of
Asia. He believed in harbors at the end. (304)

It is not the first time he has been attracted to the idea of journey. In in his early adolescence, he had broken away from Helen's guardianship and moved more and more in the circle of Ben. When she spoke to him, "his eyes were filled with the shadows of great ships and cities" (197). This is part of "the secret life" that he sinks deeper into year by year. Later, Wolfe writes of Eugene's "great hunger for voyages, . . . to come always . . . into strange cities . . . like a god in exile, stored with the enormous vision of the earth" (425-426).

After Eugene's sister Daisy marries, W.O. takes Eugene and visits with Daisy in Augusta, Georgia. Eugene is about eight or

nine. On the train, both travelers drink everything in with "thirsty adventurous eyes" (125).

This trip opens up a new possibility for him--the possibility that a door is to be found by exploring other lands. He had made the St. Louis trip with his mother when he was not quite four. Now that he is close to adolescence, St. Louis is a "faint unreality," and the present journey means much more for him. For one thing, it is an escape from the petty goings-on at Dixieland.

Augusta, Georgia, is new for him. He sees it "with the fresh watered eyes of a child, with glory, with enchantment" (125)--similar to Wordsworth's "glory and the dream," the special vision young children have of the world. The city and his vision represent something he has been searching for. He is "one who has lived in a prison" (125). Augusta is an escape from that prison into a type of the life his soul knew before birth.

But the trip is not trouble-free for Eugene. Some local children in Augusta make fun of his long hair, and Daisy quarrels with him. But these incidents only serve to remind him of the prison he left of late, so he seeks to escape again by setting off "on a world adventure, walking furiously for hours down a country road" (126).

Though Eugene's Augusta trip is not perfect, Wolfe juxtaposes it with a description of his travels with Eliza to show that travels with W.O. were much closer to heaven. Eliza is diagnosed as having Bright's disease. She makes trips into Florida and

Arkansas for her health, but also in search of wealth. She takes Eugene with her. They still sleep together.

This journey is in marked contrast with the trip to Augusta. The atmosphere of Eliza's and Eugene's life on the road is colored by her stinginess and "lack of magnificence in a magnificent world,"

by the meals of sweet rolls and milk and butter in an untidy room, by the shoe boxes of luncheon carried on the trains and opened in the diner, after a lengthy inspection of the menu had led to the ordering of coffee, by the interminable quarrels over price and charges in almost every place they went. (128)

That Eugene has inherited his father's desire to travel is evidenced in several early passages. Soon after John Dorsey Leonard becomes principal of Eugene's school, he calls all the boys and girls together and asks them to write a composition on the meaning of a French painting, The Song of the Lark. Eugene not only sees that the painting is about the coming of spring, heralded by the lark, he also sees his own situation in the painting. The young woman who hears and tries to imitate the lark is, like Eugene, idealistic. Like Luke or Eliza, the young woman's people are hard workers who would not "waste time" contemplating birds and spring. They do not understand her. Further, she wants to escape her present situation to travel.

"Sometimes she hears the whistle of a train that is going to Paris. She has never ridden on a train in her life" (173).

The whistle of a train is a call to Eugene. Elsewhere in the novel, he hears the whistle, and a desire is awakened in him. This happens on his paper-route, after his success collecting from the "dead-heads" gives him a sense of self-worth. It also happens, as we will see, while he sits in John Dorsey Leonard's class.

It is while riding a train or while remembering experiences on trains that he has some of his most transcendent experiences. "What most interested Wolfe in train rides," says Rubin, "was the sensation he received of keeping pace with time and distance, so that instead of himself being held prisoner in finite time and in one place, it was he who traveled, and the space and time which remained static" (1955, 39). Margaret Church writes that travel on trains gave Wolfe the feeling of security that he could not get from fixity (253).

Of Eugene, Wolfe writes, "So many of the sensations that returned to open haunting vistas of fantasy and imagining had been caught from a whirling landscape through the windows of the train" (LHA 159). The "combination of fixity and change" that is produced by watching the stationary objects (slatterns in doorways, boys in cowfields, station-houses) amid a fast-changing landscape gives him a sense of time frozen, "immobility stamped with eternity . . . timeless suspension" (159). This gives him a

further sense that his own life is not real but only a shadow or a dream from which he expects someone to wake him.

His train ride to Charleston, at age fifteen, has something of a dream quality, but even more important, Wolfe uses it as a metaphor for mortal life amid eternity. Eugene makes the trip with his classmate Malvin Bowden (whose mother leads the excursion) and a few other young people. The train leaves at night. Eugene and the rest of his party travel in the hot, uncomfortable, dirty day coach. The squalor of life is represented by the accumulation of peanut shells and crushed sanitary drinking cups on the floor, as well as a stale odor from the toilets. Most of the party try to sleep, symbolizing the fact that life is a "sleep and a forgetting," in Wordsworth's phrase. But it is a painful sleep: "People dozed painfully, distressed by the mournful tolling of the bell, and the grinding halts" (296). The bell seems to represent the death knell; the "grinding halts," the commotion made when a person dies, or metaphorically, gets off the train of life. Those who stay on the train must endure the "weariness of the night," the ennui of life.

They flattened noses against the dirty windows, and
watched the vast structure of the earth sweep past.

(297)

But Eugene focuses on the "sad lulling magic of the car wheels" (297). As a mystic, he finds the secret of the train--a

meditative rhythm--and allows it to lead him to memory and transcendence.

His mind was bound in the sad lulling magic of the car wheels. Clackety-clack. Clackety-clack.

Clackety-clack. Clackety-clack. He thought of his life as something that had happened long ago. He had found, at last, his gateway to the lost world. But did it lie before or behind him? Was he leaving or entering it? Above the rhythm of the wheels he thought of Eliza's laughter over ancient things. He saw a brief forgotten gesture, her white broad forehead, a ghost of old grief in her eyes. Ben, Gant--their strange lost voices. Their sad laughter. They swam toward him through green walls of fantasy. They caught and twisted at his heart. The green ghost-glimmer of their faces coiled away. Lost. Lost. (297)

These "green walls of fantasy" are reminiscent of the "wall of light" that the fiend-voices urge him to open before he begins his pre-dawn paper-route. Even though he is traveling away from that locus of revelation, he cannot leave the fiend-voices behind.

Amid this reverie, Max Isaacs comes to Eugene's seat and suggests they go out between the cars for a smoke. It is just before dawn. Max and Eugene are "still buried in night," that is, still trapped in their mortal lives, but they watch the light

breaking from the east. This light, which represents their prenatal existence, is still beyond a wall for them: "The horizon sky was barred with hard fierce strips of light." The strips of negative light, or darkness, form a cage that keeps them from reaching their goal. They hold lighted cigarettes as signs of solidarity with the prenatal life, but still, they are "knifed sharply away from it."

When, finally, the land becomes totally illuminated and Max and Eugene are part of it, there is joy mixed with sadness in the two boys. "Max Isaacs fumbled his cigarette awkwardly, looking at Eugene, and grinned sheepishly with delight, craning his neck along his collar, and making a nervous grimace of his white fuzz-haired face" (297-298). Now that the light covers them, Max does not know what to do with his cigarette. He is delighted by the illumination, but both boys know that they are still in mortal time. The light, rather than letting them back into the lost world, merely points to the aspects of their physicality, which is part of their mortality:

His hair was thick, straight, the color of taffy. He had blond eyebrows. There was much kindness in him. They looked at each other with clumsy tenderness. They thought of the lost years at Woodson Street. They saw with decent wonder their awkward bulk of puberty. The proud gate of the years swung open for

them. They felt a lonely glory. They said farewell.

(298)

But what of the "gateway to the lost world" that Eugene had found during his reverie, listening to the meditative rhythm of the train? What happened to it? What does he do with it? Did Max Isaac's interruption cause its permanent disappearance? Eugene did not know whether he was leaving the gateway or entering it. If leaving, it would mean that his lost world consisted of the life he has lived up to the present point in time. What becomes dominant in this reverie is memory of people, places and events of Eugene's past.

If Eugene discovers he is entering the gateway, it could mean that he has found the "lost lane-end into heaven," a passage to his prenatal life. But it could also mean, as in the case of leaving the gateway, that the lost world is simply that of his childhood, with no celestial connotations at all. Memory, Hagan says, "can confer a kind of immortality on all the mortal things which [Eugene] remembers" (1982, 11). Eugene's reverie is vivid: he sees a "brief forgotten gesture," not merely thinks of it. This is not only memory, but a vision of his life. But he thinks of his life "as something that had happened long ago" (297). If this vision is to be a gateway to the lost world, there must be no difference between Eugene's present time and his memory's past time. The vision must be in "time immutable." The element that will provide time immutable is not only train travel--the constant

change in place--but a new, unknown city. Eugene finds that Charleston lives "in another time. The hours were days, the days weeks" (298). Altamont, the place he knows from birth, contains all of Eugene's past time, and contains Eugene, who is time present. Charleston, or any new city, holds none of Eugene's history. It is timeless.

Earlier, Eugene had suspected that the answer to his search lay beyond the hills of Altamont, and he had received encouragement from his mediocre Latin instructor. We have already noted how John Dorsey Leonard is, in regard to power and wealth, a kindred spirit of Eliza, and therefore very much the opposite of W.O. Gant. In regard to travel, too, he is anti-Gantian. Eugene gets little out of his Latin classes, which are overly concerned with syntax and grammar and lack the passion that could put fire in a boy's heart about the writings of Caesar or Cicero. Further, "because John Dorsey Leonard was a bad sailor--he was not at all sure of Virgilian navigation," the students are not at all exposed to Virgil. Leonard, Wolfe continues, "hated exploration. He distrusted voyages" (181).

But he, like Margaret, though wrapped up in academia, points Eugene to a place beyond literature, where reality may be found. Once, while discussing the literature of Schiller with his pupils, he is inspired by that literature, as well as by the hills that

surround Altamont. "The mountains . . . have been the traditional seat of liberty," he says, and

Eugene turned his face toward the western ranges. He heard, far off, a whistle, a remote, thunder on the rails. (264)

Later, Eugene's inability to fit in at home gives him an added impetus to become a wanderer. After three semesters at Pulpit Hill, he joins the rest of family at Dixieland for Christmas. There is a feeling among them that it will be the last Christmas with W.O., since his cancer has worsened. He is feeble and distant. Eliza pretends there is nothing wrong with him, that "he'll still be here when the rest of us are under the sod." There is a lot of tension in the house.

This is when Eugene, as we have seen, gets drunk for the first time. Eliza feels her last hope is lost--Eugene is her youngest--and obliquely blames W.O.: the family is cursed for the "sins of the father." In this way, she creates more tension in the house, but what proves to be worse is the "studious forgiveness" everyone agrees to give Eugene. "They stepped with obtrusive care around his fault, filled pleasantly with Christmas and mercy" (415). Eugene's siblings become jealous, saying "he's had everything given to him; there's no reason he should act the way he did or be given any special treatment." Eugene feels alienated, and there is rising tension in the house until, finally, a war of words between Eugene and his brothers leads to a

physical fight. Eugene frees himself from his brothers' hold and begins a tirade against them and his whole family, saying he remains a stranger in spite of the seventeen years he has spent with them, that his family has given him nothing but the confusion and disorder of his life, that for them, money comes first and Eugene second. He claims that his first act after the cradle was to head for the door. Now he vows to be free of his family's hold and to "get me some beauty."

In the following chapter, then, after another semester of college, he becomes a traveler, going to Norfolk, Virginia, to find work. "Eighty miles away lay the sea and Laura" (426). In Norfolk he can be alone, a state which has become very important for him as it is part of the "secret life." He can be unknown and free of any ties and associations.

He thrilled to the glory of the secret life. The fear of the crowd, a distrust and hatred of group life, a horror of all bonds that tied him to the terrible family of the earth, called up again the vast Utopia of his loneliness. (440)

Eugene knows that if he is to find the door to the lost world, he must be alone, because any association with, or commitment to, another person will tie him to this bodily existence. He must be able to wander at will and always be alone, even lonely. The sojourn to Norfolk is an "initiation to the voyage this life will make"; it is a "prelude to exile." It is a prototype of the

journeys he will make hereafter, as well as a type of the journey known as life. There is no other purpose to this sojourn than the "blind groping of a soul toward freedom and isolation" (431). Like silence, which Eugene finds to be the *Lógos*, aloneness is the closest he can come to the simplicity of the life of the soul.

In the background is the war in Europe. The work Eugene finds on the Virginia coast is war-related. The university is slowly turned into an "armed camp" as the students who are over eighteen are training to be officers. Dixieland is nearly deserted. Ben is still there, though, wallowing in cigarettes and self-pity. He is full of bitterness and hatred as he talks to a sympathetic Eugene. Ben's lungs are weak; therefore, he cannot join the army. He, like Eugene, resents his family for the way they have neglected him. He lives now in a house of sickness and death, among the old, the lame, and the feeble. He, like them, cannot "do his bit" for the war effort. In self-pity, he lashes out before Eugene:

"I've never made good at anything. By God!" he said, in a mounting blaze of passion. "What's it all about? Can you figure it out, 'Gene? Is it really so, or is somebody playing a joke on us? Maybe we're dreaming all this. Do you think so?" (445)

Eugene agrees and wishes "they'd wake us up." Again, we see the Platonic/Wordsworthian notion that this life is a dream, whereas the real, transcendent life is the waking state. This

conversation causes Eugene to want to be part of the war effort. He believes that "war is not death to young men; war is life" (424). Real death is the death-in-life that Ben and W.O. are living. Kussy defines vitalism as "the approach and motivation whose basic feature is emphasis on life as an all-pervasive force and especially as the supreme value" (307). The supreme value for Ben and W.O. seems more to be self-pity than living to the fullest. W.O. wants his family to feel sorry for him; Ben cannot get past his bitterness toward everyone. In fact, the physical deaths of Ben and W.O. will have more life in them than their day-to-day existence.

Kussy shows how Wolfe, in contrast, through his characters Eugene Gant and George Webber, lusted after all experience, all knowledge, all sensual stimuli. This was Eugene's affirmation of life, expressed in a squeal or goat-cry. Kussy recognizes that for Wolfe there are two kinds of death, death-in-life and something like life-in-death. It is the latter that Eugene finds admirable and the former that he will struggle against, especially after seeing how a "living death" affects his brother Ben. Eugene's wish for someone to "wake us up" is now coupled with the desire to fight in France. He tries to join the officers training corps when he returns to Pulpit Hill in September, but he is two weeks too young. The war represents not only life-in-death, but a fulfillment of the fantasies of his childhood and early adolescence, an escape from the clutches of his family, and a

chance to go where he is--and can remain--unknown and alone. In order to get there, Eugene must travel. And that journey begins at the Virginia shore, the metaphorical coast of birth, and continues through the dark ocean of pre-existence.

But Ben dies first. His death is the only bright star for Eugene in the house of death that is Dixieland: W.O.'s condition is worse than ever; Ben's funeral, a far better treatment of him dead than alive, turns into a Pentland social affair; and Eliza's behavior in the whole affair demonstrates her hypocrisy. She expels from the boarding house "Fatty" Pert, Ben's last true friend, on the grounds that she is a whore; Ben refuses to let his mother into his dying presence; and Eliza, in her mourning after the death, pretends that there had actually been a closeness between mother and son, which is sheer fantasy. She "wove a thousand fables of that lost and bitter spirit" (482).

Eugene is sickened by the whole spectacle, and remains only because of Ben's spirit, which he finds in the wind. In the midst of it all, we find Eugene in a dualistic reverie, much like the conversation between Man and Body at the end of The Web and the Rock. Here it is between "the boy" and "the bright and stricken thing" within him. The bright and stricken thing urges the boy to travel: "You are alone now. You are lost. Go find yourself, lost boy, beyond the hills" (482). The boy, however, looks at his mother and says to the bright and stricken thing that he cannot leave her alone. The thing replies that she is alone, "and so are

you. . . . You must escape or you will die." The boy is afraid and says he has nowhere to go. The thing tells him he must find the place, hunt for himself. The boy then asks where the thing itself is, and the thing replies, "You must find me."

Eugene, in conversation with Eliza, agrees to stay with her a couple of days, but for the present, he returns to the cemetery. It is evening, and he finds Mrs. Pert also there. She asks him who will come to the cemetery next year to mourn Ben, and Eugene replies, "I will never come here again" (484). They agree that there are different kinds of death, that one is "when they shut you up in a box and put you in the ground, the way they did old Ben" (485). But Eugene knows there are other kinds. Just an hour before, in his dialogue with the bright and stricken thing, he had come to realize that all the events of the past were deaths. Each passing of an event or a time of life into memory is a death. "And like a life," the thing adds. "Each time that you die, you will be born again." The present event, time of life, and situation are no different. Nor, he comes to believe, is the final death of our lives: "Over that final hedge, he thought, not death, as I once believed--but new life--and new lands" (494).

For now, however, Eugene must leave his mother and travel "beyond the hills" into a life of his own. Thus, he "will never come here again." Ben, after all, is not here.

CONCLUSION

Is the Door Ever Found?

Ben's death is a revolt against the death-in-life of Dixieland, though also a result of it. Three weeks before he goes to bed with pneumonia, Ben rants at length in front of Eugene about his family's indifference. He says that they have never given him anything. He is proven right when he comes down with influenza. Eliza's concern for money takes precedence over her son's welfare, and her denial of the severity of his illness contributes to his death. In a letter to Margaret Roberts, Wolfe characterized Eliza as having a "growing mounting lust for ownership that finally is tinged with mania--a struggle that ends in decay, death, desolation" (Wolfe Letters 112). That lust for ownership brings with it extreme parsimony, even when common sense and a son's sickness call for generosity. Dixieland is not well-heated, especially since there are now, in the wartime winter, few boarders left to heat it for; Eliza waits before calling a doctor--and then only a second-rate one; and even when it is known that Ben has pneumonia in both lungs, Eliza pretends there is not much wrong with him.

W.O.'s behavior also contributes to the death-in-life character of Dixieland at this time. The old man does not put Ben's interest ahead of his own, though his son is on the brink of death. He too is dying, but his death is not as imminent. His

weeping is affected and filled more with self-pity than sorrow for Ben. He is resentful that the care of Ben's death should be placed upon him in his old age. He worries about having to pay for Ben's funeral and having enough money left over to get through "this croo-ell winter."

Ben, then, rebels against this impersonal, insensitive house with his own death. He refuses to see his mother--the sight of her in her old, dirty sweater makes him sick (thus Eliza's jealousy, which leads to Mrs. Pert's expulsion). Wolfe is showing us the ugly results of living a death-in-life existence: a young man denying his mother entrance to the room of his death.

But Ben is a fighter, as Luke recognizes: "'D-d-don't worry about his f-f-fighting,' said Luke, in a rush of eulogy. 'That b-b-boy'll fight as long as he's g-g-got a breath left in him'" (455). But rather than fighting death, he fights continued existence. When Luke and Eugene bring in an oxygen tank, Ben refuses the mask.

He fought it away tigerishly. . . . Eugene gripped Ben's hot wrists: his heart turned rotten. Ben rose wildly from his pillows, wrenching like a child to get his hands free, gasping horribly, his eyes wild with terror:

"No! No! 'Gene! 'Gene! No! No!"

Eugene caved in, releasing him and turning away,
white-faced, from the accusing fear of the bright
dying eyes. (458)

Eugene sees that Ben wants to die and escape from his
death-in-life existence, because Eugene has sought escape too. So
his "heart turn[s] rotten" when he sees himself as an element of
the household, trying to prevent Ben's escape. Ben seems happier
when it is clear that his escape is imminent.

His breathing was easier, he hummed snatches of
popular songs, some old and forgotten, called up from
the lost and secret adyts of his childhood; but always
he returned, in his quiet humming voice, to a popular
song of war-time--cheap, sentimental, but now
tragically moving: "Just a Baby's Prayer at Twilight,"

" . . . when lights are low.

Poor baby's years"

Helen entered the darkening room.

"Are filled with tears."

The fear had gone out of his eyes: above his
gasping he looked gravely at her, scowling, with the
old puzzled child's stare. Then, in a moment of
fluttering consciousness, he recognized her. He
grinned beautifully, with the thin swift flicker of
his mouth.

"Hello, Helen! It's Helen!" he cried eagerly.

(458-459)

As Wages points out, Helen's name and character represent light. It is light that Ben has been searching for throughout the novel:

He was a stranger, and as he sought through the house, he was always aprowl to find some entrance into life, some secret undiscovered door--a stone, a leaf,--that might admit him into light and fellowship. . . . Each morning at three o'clock, [he] went down to the roaring morning presses and the inksmell that he loved, to begin the delivery of his route. (92, 93)

We see later that the place he goes to is full of light: "Hot bands of light streamed murkily from the doors and windows of the office" (245). Further on, he is still searching:

Ben--the ghost, the stranger, prowling at this moment in another town, going up and down the thousand streets of life, and finding no doors. (434)

Now, at his death, he finds a door and returns to the lost world, where he will be bathed in light. The fact is symbolically supported by Dr. Coker, who, when pressed by Helen as to whether anything else can be done for Ben, says, "He's drowning! Drowning!" (461). He is drowning not only in the fluid accumulating in his lungs, but in the prenatal sea from which we all come, and therefore returning to it: the "primeval slime," the

womb, the "viscous and interminable seas at dawn," the ocean he had hoped to cross to join the war.

Even as Ben is making his spiritual passage, the family gathers in his death room, and there is petty bickering among them. W.O. sits in self-pity, and Helen berates both him for his ingratitude toward her and Eliza for her penny-pinching. Amid the "ugly clamor of their dissension, . . . they heard the low mutter of Ben's expiring breath" (461). His death commands an attention in its very quietness. His "low mutter" into peace is more important than the continuation of their in-fighting. And it has an affect on them:

The dark rich miracle of his life surged over them its enormous loveliness. They grew quiet and calm, they plunged below all the splintered wreckage of their lives, they drew together in a superb communion of love and valiance, beyond horror and confusion, beyond death. (461)

His death takes W.O. out of the "reverie of his own approaching death" and makes him think of his lost years, the years that led "to the birth of his strange son" (462-463). The family recognizes that Ben has found the door: "They looked upon him . . . with a thrill of awful recognition, as one who remembers a forgotten and enchanted word" (462). The "quiet one" has found the Logos.

A New Mythology?

One of the questions I proposed at the beginning of this thesis was whether Thomas Wolfe, in writing Look Homeward, Angel, was trying to build a mythology that would help him answer the stark reality of death. Intermittently throughout the novel, we see W.O. Gant's darker side, the side that fears death above anything else. It only finds verbal expression when the old man is drunk or in extreme pain. We may take these fears as Thomas Wolfe's own. Rubin notes that "Wolfe's attitude toward death varied between awe and terror" (1953, 299). Wolfe, however, feared not only death but the futility of life. Not a believer in the Christian god and afterlife, he struggled against the "nothingness of life" and of death and of life after death (cf. LHA 465). He promised one of his professors, George Pierce Baker, that he would someday write a play "for my soul's ease and comfort" (Wolfe Letter 41). That play turned out to be his first novel (cf. Aswell ix; Kennedy 11-13), and it seems that the ease and comfort he sought was that which comes with a coming to terms with death. For death permeates his work from that time on, including the many death scenes--elaborately described--and a whole collection of short stories with death as their themes. It is as if his very writing about death were the way he struggled with it. Faulkner's comment, that Wolfe wrote "as if he didn't have long to live" (Rascoe 304), may perhaps be read in this light. The titles of his books, too, tell us that they deal with

the broad issue of life and death: Look Homeward, Angel, Of Time and the River, From Death to Morning, You Can't Go Home Again.

Wolfe's obsession with death shows itself also in the way he writes of W.O.'s fear of death. We might almost believe he were writing from his own point of view:

All day, with fear-stark eyes, Gant had sat, like a broken statue, among his marbles, drinking. It was a cancer. . . . He could not view with amusement and detachment the death of the senses, the waning of desire, the waxing of physical impotence. . . . He had the most burning of all lusts--the lust of memory, the ravenous hunger of the will which tries to waken what is dead. . . . "A pity, a pity," he muttered. "So young." He had the moment of triumph all men have when they hear someone has died. A moment, too, of grisly fear. Sixty-four. (220, 230, 260)

And, in terrific pain from his cancer, he might cry out in the middle of the night:

"I see it! I see it! The knife! The knife! . . . Do you see its shadow? . . . There! There! There!" (305)

It is highly possible that Eugene Gant-Thomas Wolfe inherited this "grisly" fear of death from W.O. Gant-William Oliver Wolfe. He too is afflicted from time to time with the "ghost of the old fear" (cf. 274). As a child, he "did not understand change" or growth. He became sick with fear when he compared his present

self to his picture as a baby (158). "Each day, he thought, we pass the spot where some day we must die" (276). It is not only that we pass some appointed spot, the fact is that we may die at any moment, so we are continually passing the place of death: it is wherever we are.

Thomas-Eugene was very concerned about his health in college. In Look Homeward, Angel we read that

He asked the medical students innumerable questions about the treatment or cure of inherited blood maladies, venereal diseases, intestinal and inguinal cancers, and the transference of animal glands to men.
(489)

David Herbert Donald notes that Wolfe was always afraid of illness, especially tuberculosis. About ten years after Wolfe wrote Look Homeward, Angel, he saw a doctor about a fever he had difficulty shaking. Donald believes the doctor may have made x-rays "that revealed a suspicious dark area in his chest, for afterwards, pacing up and down in his apartment, Wolfe blurted out to [literary agent Elizabeth] Nowell, 'There's something the matter with my lung.' . . . Wolfe began to have melancholy thoughts about death and continued to brood about death for several months" (410-411). This is when he added to his story, "I Have a Thing to Tell You," a passage he had begun to work on in 1935, when he feared that he had contracted gonorrhea (Donald 410, 325):

Something has spoken to me in the night, burning the
tapers of the waning year; something has spoken to me
in the night, and told me I shall die, I know not
where. (Wolfe, "I Have A Thing to Tell You," 207)

Wolfe also talked to his friend Henry Volkening at one
point, asking if he had ever seen anyone die. Volkening told him
he had, and Wolfe wanted to know everything he saw. "Did he give
any sign of--of--anything?" he asked. "I suppose not. I suppose
no one ever really has" (Volkening 214).

Since Christianity did not assuage his fears, was Wolfe
looking for solace in Plato's myth of prenatal existence, or in
his own variation of it? For myths are nothing more than ways to
explain the questions we have about life and death. We build
myths up into systems of thought, such as philosophies, political
ideologies, and religions. Or we take refuge in science, which is
also a myth.

We have seen how Kussy finds Wolfe's place in the system of
thought known as vitalism, that Wolfe emphasized life as "an
all-pervasive force, . . . as the supreme value" (307). Wolfe's
vitalism shows itself in Eugene Gant (and George Webber) in the
way he lusted after all experience, all knowledge, all sensual
experiences. This vitalism was Wolfe's (and his alter ego's)
affirmation of life, expressed in his squeal or goat-cry. I
suggest it was also his search for more life beyond this physical
life. As an artist, he was sensitive to the intimations of

another world and life beyond this one. He held on to those intimations throughout adolescence and adulthood. He searched not only in sex, language, and travel for a way back to the lost world, but in every object and experience and person he encountered. Thus, his vitalism is not only an exploration or exploitation of human life, but a belief and a hope in it: Wolfe believed the answer to the question of death could be found now, while we are still alive, in and through physical objects, sensations, and experiences.

The death that permeates Wolfe's work is not something morbid or stagnant, but a reality that urges his readers to live and to find meaning. In Eugene's exuberance and lust for experience he is battling the "death of the senses" and the "waning of desire." He is clutching life. But there is more to it than that.

Kussy, as we have seen, recognizes that for Wolfe there are two kinds of death, one a death-in-life, the other a life-in-death. "It is only in these terms that vitalism, the glorification of life, can reconcile itself with death at all" (309). Thus, Wolfe and his alter-egos lived grandly and hoped to die the same way. Death scenes in Wolfe are always grand and poetic. A "good death" must be as big as life. There must be, after all, meaning in death because if there is none, there is also no meaning in life.

We have seen some of the people and groups that represent death-in-life for Wolfe: Eliza in her parsimony; Leonard in his

mediocrity; the fraternity members at Pulpit Hill in their in-grouping; Steve, W.O., and Ben in their self-pity. But the death-in-life that Wolfe abhorred is not only the lives of the narrow-minded and effete, the in-crowd who cannot feel secure outside a crowd, the money-hungry and materialistic; it is also the very process of birth, in the Platonic sense. But only if we let it be so. Yes, "our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting," a fall of the soul from the upper world eternal into the prisonhouse of the body mortal, and thus life is death; but it is also a challenge for those who will not settle for death. It is an opportunity to live as completely as possible and to search for heaven in the midst of it all.

Wolfe also seeks solace in the aspect of death that is related to time. Here, finally, is an escape from chronological time into "time immutable." The last moment of Ben's death contains all the moments of his life, just as "each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years" and is "a window on all time" (LHA 3). Ben's moment of death is described thus:

Filled with a terrible vision of all life in the one moment, he seemed to rise forward bodilessly from his pillows without support--a flame, a light, a glory--joined at length in death to the dark spirit who had brooded upon each footstep of his lonely adventure on earth. (465)

The last moment of his life not only contains all the previous moments of his life, but of all life. It is a "window on all time." In that moment, life stops and, concomitantly, time stops. Timelessness, an aspect of eternity, is reached; the last moment becomes eternal.

But is the eternal moment enjoyed by the spirit? The description of Ben's death seems to indicate that it is: Ben "joined . . . the dark spirit who had brooded upon each footstep of his lonely adventure on earth." This dark spirit is the god of Plato/Wolfe's myth. It is the oversoul, all the spirits that exist. But was Wolfe convinced by his own myth? The incident in which Wolfe asked Volkening if the dying man showed any sign of going to an afterlife shows he still had his doubts. Wolfe was never sure. In fact, the only kind of immortality he was ever sure of was regeneration.

Mrs. Pert, at the grave of Ben, reminds Eugene that there are different kinds of death. Eugene has just had a conversation with his "bright and stricken thing" in which they decide that each event in life is a death. Moreover, Ben's life on this earth had been a "death-in-life," moping around as he had in a house of death. His funeral was less of a memorial to him than a pretty disposal of the body. Eugene tells Mrs. Pert that he will not come back to the cemetery. When she leaves, his I becomes a We: "We shall not come back again" (486). What he in fact realizes is that we shall never come back to this death that we call

life--where each event is a death. When the body finally dies, "we"--the soul--will be released into the prenatal life again, and not come back to the cemetery, the earth that covers us, the physical world. "Pain and pride and death will pass, and will not come again" (486).

But "Ben will come again, he will not die again, in flower and leaf, in wind and music far, he will come back again" (486). This does not mean he will be reborn into this life, since his rebirth would simply be another death. But he will come in "flower and leaf, in wind and music." On one level, this is eternal regeneration. There had been talk between Eugene and Mrs. Pert about what kind of flowers Ben will push up. He will come again when the elements of his body rise to the roots of plants.

But we also remember that Wolfe believes, with Wordsworth, that certain things in the world hint of another life. In fact, this phenomenon has just happened to Eugene on his walk to the cemetery. The withered leaves shaking on the trees set off in him a train of thought that sparks a realization that there is something in him that will go "beyond the hills," the physicality that rims in life.

Wind pressed the boughs, the withered leaves were shaking. It was October, but the leaves were shaking. A star was shaking. A light was waking. Wind was quaking. The star was far. The night, the light. The light was bright. A chant, a song, the slow dance

of the little things within him. The star over the town, the light over the hill, the sod over Ben, night over all. His mind fumbled with little things. Over us all is something. Star, night, earth, light . . . light . . . O lost! . . . a stone . . . a leaf . . . a door . . . O ghost! . . . a light . . . a song . . . a light . . . a light swings over the hill . . . over us all . . . a star shines over the town . . . over us all . . . a light. (486, ellipses in text)

Now that Ben's spirit has found its passage, he will come "in flower and leaf" to intimate immortality to mortal beings. That is why "Spring, the cruellest and fairest of the seasons," will also come again. The recurring pattern of death and rebirth in nature is necessary so that Ben and others who have died can continue to intimate immortality.

We also see regeneration played out in the larger scope of the novel. Eugene strongly identifies with W.O. The objects of W.O.'s quest become Eugene's doors: travel, sex, language, art. Eugene is the reincarnation of W.O. As the old man wanes (and he does die for a good part of the novel), Eugene waxes. W.O. is the dying god, Eugene the rising one.

Regeneration was also part of Wolfe's personal beliefs. It worked itself out in his life in at least two ways: reproduction and art. Although he never married, Wolfe once said, "It is only through his work and children that man can achieve immortality,

and even the work, no matter how good, will die, in time" (Volkening 207). Throughout Look Homeward, Angel, Eugene sees the earth in its fertility, comparing it to a "spermy woman." Wolfe also uses the myth of the dying fertility god in the novel. And the earth is eternal in regeneration. Man dies constantly: every event and every moment is a death. Eugene is fascinated and bewildered whenever he sees life springing from death. For example, he looks at Sister Sheba, a teacher at the Leonards' school, her seemingly old and consumptive husband, and their two infants. Although Sheba's husband is only forty-nine, his illness makes him appear to be in his seventies. Eugene sees him as a "cadaver, flecked lightly on the lips with blood" (185). Eugene and his friends are amazed that Sheba's husband could still beget children, and Eugene is bewildered by "the unsearchable riddle--out of life, death, out of the coarse rank earth, a flower" (186).

Women, then, for Wolfe, are the ground in which dying man plants his seed in order to attain immortality through progeny. Perhaps this is one of the reasons Eugene finds sex as a possible door. And when Ben dies, Eugene thinks of death as a "lovely and tender woman, Ben's friend and lover, who had come to free him, to save him from the torture of life" (467).

Art is also a place where one may plant his seed. Any writer may be remembered by his work and words. An autobiographical writer in particular, such as Wolfe, may live on in the story he

tells of himself. But is there not another way? Ben Gant was Ben Wolfe, Thomas Wolfe's brother. Tom watched him die. He lamented his death and groped for assurance, as Eugene did, that his brother "had not passed into nothingness" (cf. Kennedy 140). When Wolfe writes, "We can believe in the nothingness of life, we can believe in the nothingness of death and of life after death--but who can believe in the nothingness of Ben?" (LHA 465), he writes one of the most personal and subjective, yet at the same time beautiful and universal, sentences of his entire work. For Ben was Eugene-Thomas' brother, whom he knew better than perhaps anyone. And who can believe in the nothingness of someone he knows and who knows him? Wolfe had to immortalize Ben because he could not allow him to be nothing. And so Ben Wolfe comes again, in leaf, flower, wind, music, and poetry--the poetry of Look Homeward, Angel. He comes in the natural world and the world of art to continue to be a symbol--as a stone, a leaf, or a door is a symbol.

Regeneration, then, seems to be the only immortality. In the concluding scene of Look Homeward, Angel, the ghost of Ben confirms this. There is no heaven, he says, "no happy land. There is no end to hunger" (520). The only heaven to be found is in life. Eugene asks Ben, "Where is the world?" Ben replies, "Nowhere, . . . You are your world." Ben convinces Eugene to keep searching in this life for his answer, and Eugene vows to hunt "the ghost and haunter of myself"--whatever it is that speaks to

him of a lost world. The hunt will require a voyage, but that voyage is through the continent of the self. It is "the first, the last, the only" voyage, and the best; and it is through "seas stranger than those haunted by the Albatross," on "coasts more strange than Cipango, in a place more far than Fez" (521), the self, the place Eugene has overlooked.

Hagan sees Eugene's vocation as artist playing an important role in this realization. Eugene's interest in language, memory, and fantasy, discussed throughout the novel, culminates in the final chapter. It is his strong imagination that makes Ben appear; it is his powerful memory that allows the parade of "the fierce bright horde of Ben, . . . in a thousand moments" to proceed. When Eugene discovers that art can effect the "union of the ordinary and the miraculous," Hagan says, "he will have come to know at the same time that the 'door' to the Earthly Paradise can be found anywhere--even in ugly, humdrum Altamont--through the exercise of his creative power itself" (Hagan 138). That is why Ben says, "You are your world." Eugene realizes then that

No leaf hangs for me in the forest; I shall lift no stone upon the hills; I shall find no door in any city. But in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul, I shall find the forgotten language, the lost world, a door where I may enter, and music strange as any ever sounded. (521)

We see finally that the leaf and the stone, besides being things which intimate immortality, ambiguously also stand for death: the withering leaf in October and the stone upon a grave. It is not Eugene's time to die; therefore, "no leaf hangs for him in the forest." Further, he will not seek the lost world now in death; he will "lift no stone upon the hills" and crawl into a grave. Nor will he engage in a frenzied search in strange city after strange city for the door to that lost world.

But as an artist, he will search himself in a journey through his past. Somewhere within himself is the "great forgotten language." The imagination that is able to call a dead man back and receive wisdom from him, able to animate stone angels and see a parade of "Ben, in a thousand moments"--the ghost of memory assembled at the will of the artist--is able, also, to discover the Logos and the lost world.

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